本好きの下剋上

司書になるためには
手段を選んでいられません

第一部 兵士の娘Ⅰ

香月美夜
miya kazuki
イラスト：椎名 優
you shiina

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I 本がないなら
作ればいい！
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Ascendance of a Bookworm

– I'll Become a Librarian At Any Cost! –

- Volume 1 -

The Soldier's Daughter

(Chapters 1-42)

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[Translated by: blastron translations]

– Synopsis –

Urano, a bookworm who had finally found a job as a librarian at a university, was sadly killed shortly after graduating from college.

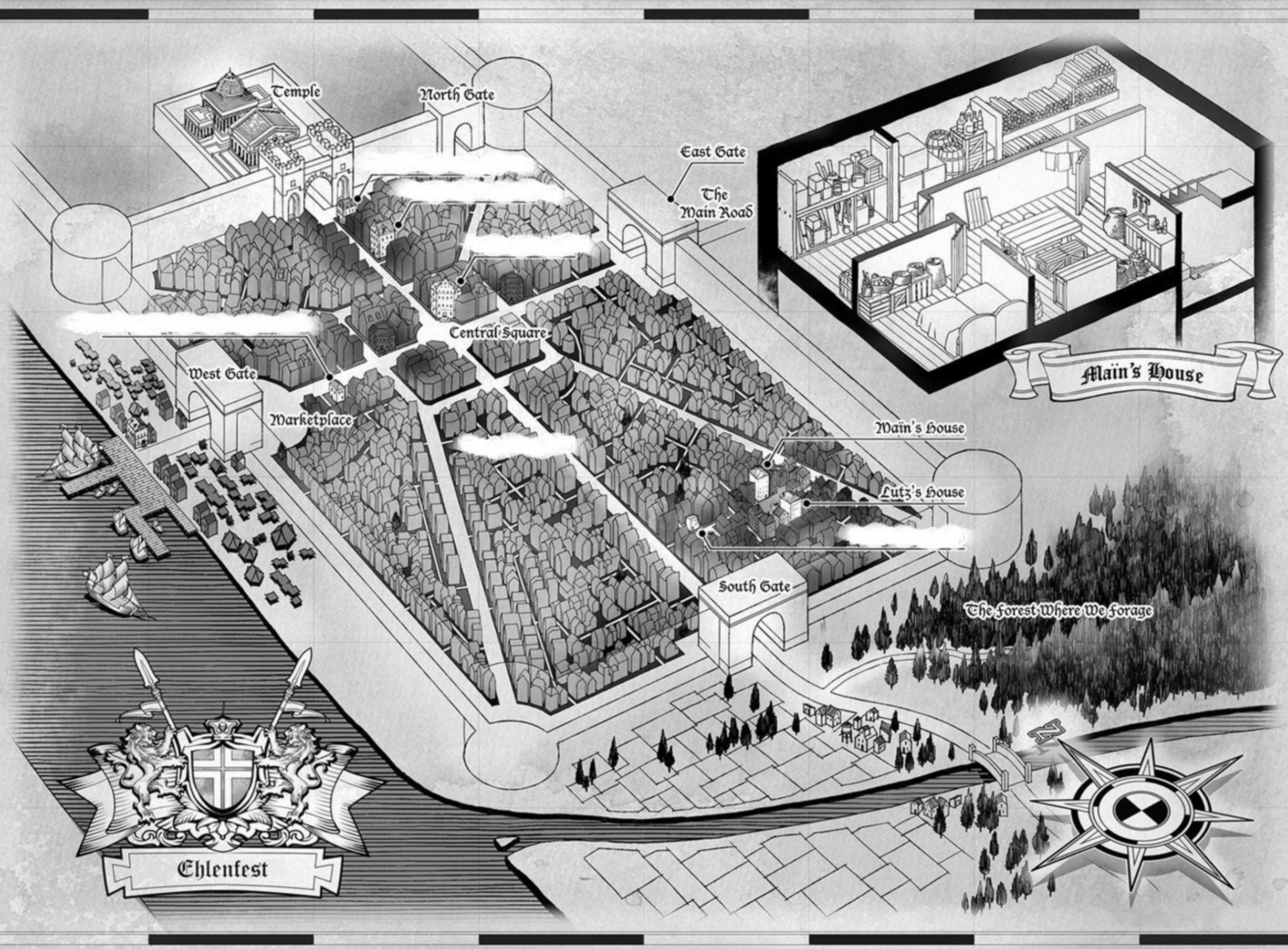
She was reborn as the daughter of a soldier in a world where the literacy rate is low and books were scarce.

No matter how much she wanted to read, there were no books around.

What is a bookworm to do without any books?
Make them, of course.

Her goal is to become a librarian! So that she may once again live surrounded by books, she must start by making them herself.

第1話 新しい生活


Temple
North Gate
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The Main Road
Central Square
West Gate
Marketplace
Maïn's House
Lutz's House
South Gate
The Forest Where We Forage
Maïn's House
Ehlenfest
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Chapter 1
Prologue

My name is Urano Motosu, and I am twenty-two years old. I love books. I really love books. I love books more than I love getting enough food.

I love how the printed words let me reach out and touch another person's ideas, their fantasies. My heart dances along the roads of thought laid down by the author, and I can't help but smile. Absorbing the vast knowledge contained within just a single volume always leaves me feeling like I've grown as a person. The whole wide world, which I have never seen with my own eyes, is at my fingertips, stacked neatly within the shelves of bookstores and libraries; isn't it intoxicating? The fairy tales of foreign lands, the glimpses of life in distant times and places, the reaches of every branch of history… when I absorb myself in a book, time evaporates around me.

Psychology, religion, history, geography, education, folklore, mathematics, physics, geology, chemistry, biology, art, fitness, language, fiction… All of humanity's accumulated knowledge and insight has been tightly packed into these books, and I love each of them from the bottom of my heart.

Encyclopedias, stretching to fill the entire shelf; the collection of literature, with every volume in place; specialty magazines that look so simple on the cover, but hold such advanced contents; colorful periodicals full of photographs; countless novels, written with fastidious prose; light novels, lacking any depth but still selling fantastically; huge picture books, intended for children; manga, the comics that are the pride of Japan; comics and magazines published by and for fans… the rustling of each turning page is more intoxicating than the finest wine.

I also love the smell of the darkest corners of the library archives, where the dusty, even a little musty scent of ancient books fills the air. Just slowly breathing in the smell of old books sends waves of ecstasy crashing through my body. The smell of new books is equally irresistible! The smell of fresh ink on new paper tells me that there is something new waiting to be discovered between those pages, and just thinking about it fills me with excitement.

I want to live my entire life surrounded by books. If I can, I want to spend the rest of my life in a dark, but well-ventilated archive, where the books are shielded from the

sun's damaging rays. I'd spend every second I could reading, inseparable from my books, until my skin became ghostly pale, my body weakened from lack of exercise, and I forgot so many meals that I had to be pulled away by force. I want to die buried in books. I don't want to quietly pass on in bed! Being smothered to death by a mountain of books would make me so unbelievably happy.

…Well, I should use the past tense here.

Because, just a little while ago…! There was a big earthquake, and I was crushed to death underneath a pile of books! Maaan, really, out of all my wishes to grant, why this?

I really did want this, but I'm not really feeling like God did me any favors here. I had just gotten my librarian certificate, and had somehow managed, in this age of unemployment, to find a position at a university library!

God, please. If I can, I'd like to be reborn. There's still so much more for me to read. Even in my next life, I want to read.

So, make me a librarian. Let me spend each day surrounded by books. Of course, I know that working as a librarian won't let me read all the time. It's a job, and I'll be busy, and I know that. But still, other jobs won't let me spend the entire day surrounded by books. Just being surrounded by books will make my happy. The intoxicating smell of ink and paper… who else could appreciate these feelings? Who else can feel this fluttering of my heart that occurs whenever I find myself looking back at all of this amassed history, these words written to preserve the insights of man, a uniquely human labor of the mind that is as old as writing itself?

If I can just read, that would be fine. Please, God. If you've heard my wish, please let me be reborn. When I am, I can read again.

Chapter 2
A New Life

Bang! Bang! A sound like someone striking the floor or a table rattles me awake, as wherever I was sleeping starts to wobble back and forth. With every oscillation, a shot of pain blasts through my skull like I was being punched in the head, and I let out a small moan.

Shut up… please… shut up…

The irritating noises and vibrations didn't stop, continuing at a steady rhythm, not letting me sleep at all.

I'm kept awake, painfully aware of the vibrations reverberating within my spinning head. I plug my ears, hoping it will go away. Moving around feels strange, like my body isn't doing exactly what I tell it to. All of my joints are sore, and I feel feverish all throughout my body, like I'd come down with the flu.

"Ugh…"

I need my glasses if I want to figure out what's going on. With my eyes screwed shut, I feel around for the glasses I always keep near my pillow. My entire body feels a little bit numb, and my arm's movements are sluggish. As I squirm, something beneath me rustles with a sound like grass or paper.

"…what's making that sound?"

The voice that comes out of my mouth sounds too high, almost childlike. It might because I'm ill, but it's not at all the voice I'm used to hearing. Even though I want to do nothing more than sleep off this fever, I can't just ignore this many abnormalities around me. I slowly open my eyes. My field of vision is warped, thanks to this extremely high fever. I don't know if it's the tears in my eyes helping me see in place of my glasses, but everything is much clearer than it usually is.

"Eh?"

The first thing I notice is a ceiling that, while it may have originally been white, has been stained black with soot. Some number of thick, black beams hold it up, across which a spider has build an enormous web. This is absolutely nothing like any room I remember.

"…Where am I?"

I look around the room, keeping my head perfectly still so as not to shake the tears from my eyes. It's obvious, from what I see, that much of what's around me is entirely unlike the Japan in which I was born and raised. Just from the architectural style of the ceiling, this isn't a Japanese-style building, it's Western. Furthermore, it's not a modern, steel-framed construction, but something much older. The bed I'm on is hard, and there's no mattress beneath me. Instead, I seem to be lying on some kind of cushion made of a prickly material. Through the dirty cloth that covers it, I smell a strange scent. On top of that, my body itches here and there, like I'm being bitten by ticks or fleas.

"W… wait a second…"

My most recent memory is being crushed under the weight of countless books, and I don't remember getting rescued at all. At the very least, I don't think any hospital in Japan would put a patient on top of a sheet this dirty. Timidly, I try to raise my hand over my head so that I can see it, and what I see is the small, slender hand of a child. I live a lifestyle where I was shut indoors with my books all day, so the untanned and almost unhealthy skin was no surprise, but at twenty-two years of age my hands were, of course, those of an adult. Completely different from these small, malnourished-looking hands before me now. These small, child-like hands that I can open and close at will. As I move around, my body does not feel at all like I'm used to it feeling. At this shocking realization, my mouth goes dry.

"…What's going on?"

It's possible that I might have reincarnated. God might have heard my dying wish and given me new life, so that I may read again. This is incomprehensible. I want to know more about the world around me, so I lift my heavy head and slowly push my feverish body upright. My sweat-soaked hair sticks to the side of my head, but I pay it no mind as I look around the room. I see more bed-like platforms like the one I'm on, the dirty cloths on top of them, and a few boxes full of various things… but no bookshelves.

“There’s no… books…”

The only door in this room swings open. In an instant, the pounding noise reverberating through my head goes away, only to be replaced by the sound of footsteps as somebody outside bustles about. I really have no idea what’s happening. Based on the beams across the ceiling, the state of the walls, and the kinds of furniture in this room, I feel like this is something out of European history. There’s nothing around me to indicate modern civilization. Is this an extremely backwards country, or have I somehow slipped through time and wound up in the past? If only I knew; if I did, I’d have a lot easier time figuring out my next move.

“…Am I hallucinating in my final moments?”

As worried tumble around my feverish head, a woman appears in the doorway, having heard me moving around and talking to myself. She is wearing a triangle bandana tied around her head and is in her late 20s, judging by the condition of her once-beautiful face. Her general facial features are pretty enough, but all of the dirt ruins it. If she were to wash her face (and her clothes), she’d look half-decent, but it’s such a shame that she is the way she is now. Generally, I don’t worry too much about someone’s appearance (or my own, really) as long as they keep themselves clean; if they’re filthy, though, I really wish that they’d put a little effort in, otherwise their beauty just goes to waste.

“Maine, %&$#+@*+#%?” says the woman in a language I don’t understand.

At the sound of her voice, someone else’s memories burst through my consciousness, and I let out a small cry. In the blink of an eye, several years’ worth of memories crowd into my mind. The sheer pressure of it feels like it’s churning my brain to a pulp, and I grab my head in pain.

“Maine, are you all right? You didn’t wake up for the longest time! I was starting to get worried.”
“…Mom?”

A few memories bubble to the surface. The woman who came to check on me and is now gently stroking my head is my mother, and my name is Maine. I don’t know how I suddenly started to understand what she was saying; this deluge of information has left my mind in shambles. Honestly, I wish this could have waited until I was feeling a little better. Sure, I wished that I could be reincarnate so that I could keep reading,

and sure, it looks like I have, in fact, been reincarnated, but it's not like I'm just going to meekly accept that this woman in front of me is suddenly my mother.

"How are you feeling? It looks like you have a headache," she says.

The fingers of the hand she places on my forehead are stained with green and yellow spots. Does her job involve working with dye? I remember that workers back in Japan that worked with indigo dye had similar stains on their hands. I don't want to let this so-called mother, who I simultaneously know nothing about yet somehow remember, touch me, so I flinch away from her outstretched hand, bury myself in the stinking bed, and screw my eyes shut.

"…My head… still hurts. I wanna sleep," I say.
"Oh, rest well."

As my mother left this bed-filled room, I started to think deeply. Between the dizziness from my fever and the disarray in my head, there's no way I could just quietly get back to sleep.

"I'm not mistaken… I died, didn't I?"

Unbidden, an image of my own mother floats to the surface of my mind, and I silently apologize that I'll never see her again. She'll probably be furious, screaming "how many times did I tell you that you had too many books?!" while choking back tears of grief. I raise a sluggish arm and wipe a tear from my eye.

"I'm sorry, Mom…" I whisper, an apology that will never reach her ears.

I reluctantly let go of that image, and start to carefully sort through the memories of this child, Maine, that had been dumped into my head. Her latest memory was of having an extremely painful, painful fever, so painful that she couldn't bear it. It seems to me like, somehow, the Maine who used to own this body died, and I possessed it in her place. Oh, or maybe I was actually reborn in this world, and the delirium of the fever is causing the memories of my past life to resurface?

"It doesn't matter, either way. I'm going to have to live as Maine from now on, there's no way I can change it…"

Since that's the case, I need to sift through Maine's memories to learn more about the situation I'm in; otherwise, my family might start to get suspicious. However, no matter how hard I think, Maine's memories are those of a little girl with still-developing language skills, and there's a lot that her parents said that she didn't really understand. She didn't know they meant! She's missing a lot of useful words from her vocabulary, so most of what she remembers is cryptic and ambiguous.

"Whoa, no… what should I do?"

From Maine's childish little memories, I've figured out what I do know. Her family consists of four people. Her mother is the woman who was just in here. She has an older sister, Tory. Her father has a job that's something like a soldier.

And, most importantly, this is not Earth. From the image in Maine's head, underneath the bandana that her mother was wearing, her hair is a rich green, like jade. You might think that she'd have to dye it to get it that color, but it really is naturally green. It's such an unnatural color that I almost kind of want to check to see if it's a wig. It seems really unlikely, though, that she would be some kind of cosplayer who always wears a green wig and dirty clothes; it's much more realistic to think that I'm in some sort of alternate dimension.

Incidentally, Maine's sister's hair is blue-green, and her father's hair is blue. Maine's own hair is a deep navy blue. Should I be grateful that my hair is close to black, or should I be sighing at my cosplaying family? Regardless, this house doesn't seem to have a mirror, and no matter how much I dig I can't find a clear image of what I look like, apart from my hair color. Well, based on what I know about my mother and father's looks, and what my sister looks like, I guess I don't look half bad. I'm also, without a doubt, filthy.

"Ughh, I really need a bath. …Do we even have one?"

Realistically, my appearance isn't my biggest concern right now, it's my living conditions. It seems like the family that I've been reborn into is mind-blowingly poor. Just from looking around, things seem pretty bad. The cloth that I, a sick child, am wrapped in is extremely threadbare and worn-out. Even for hand-me-downs from my sister, this is too cruel. I briefly thought that this might be some kind of abuse, but according to Maine's memories even her mother's clothes are sewn together out of rags, and her sister's are much the same. This is the standard for my new family. My

father's work clothes are relatively solid, with only a few patches, but even so he was only ever provisioned one uniform, and that was several years ago.

On top of that, this house doesn't seem to be stand-alone. The wall closest to me is made of some kind of brick, and through it I can hear footsteps climbing up and down stairs and the voices of people who I presume are our neighbors. Perhaps this is some kind of housing complex or apartment building?

So, about this reincarnation business… aren't I supposed to be reborn as some kind of nobility, so that I don't have to worry about living a difficult life?

I breathe a heavy sigh at the rest of my conditions. I may have had a perfectly ordinary lifestyle back in Japan, but that was massively different to what I'm facing now. I don't know what era or what country I've been born into now, but Japan was a nice place to live, overflowing with wonderful things. Comfortable fabrics, soft beds, books, books, more books…

"Aaah, I want to read a book. Reading always helps my fevers go down."

No matter how dire my circumstances, I'll be able to endure it as long as I have books. I place a finger to my temple and concentrate, searching through my memory for books. Where in this house could the bookshelves be?

"Maine, you awake?" A voice suddenly breaks through my concentration. A girl, about seven or eight years old, is walking towards me with light footsteps. According to my memories, this is Tory. Her blue-green hair is carefully woven in a simple braid, but I can tell at a glance that it's extremely dried out and in bad need of washing. Just like her mom, she's a little dirty all over, and I really want her to wash up. She's wasting her adorable face.

I may be thinking that, but it's the opinion of an outsider from Japan, a country with a high standard of personal hygiene. Even if you're poor, you still want to maintain a healthy living environment; otherwise, you'll fall ill, then you have to see a doctor, then you've spent money you don't have.

I really don't care that much about that right now, though. There's exactly one thing that's on my mind.

"Tory," I ask, "could you bring me a '*book*'?"

Based on Tory's age, there must be about ten or so picture books in the house. I may need to be resting to get over this sickness, but I can still read. Reading books from an alternate dimension is, right now, my highest priority above all else.

"Tory, please!"

Tory looks blankly at me, her adorable little sister, with her head tilted to one side.
"Huh? What's a '*book*'?"
"Wh… uhh, it's a thing where '*words*' and '*pictures*' have been '*written down*'…"
"Maine, what are you talking about? I didn't understand, what did you say?"
"I told you, a '*book*'! I want a '*picture book*'!"
"What's that? I don't really understand…?"

It seems like I might have accidentally used Japanese words in place of words that Maine doesn't know. No matter how hard I try to explain it to Tory, she just stands there with her head cocked to one side and a dumbfounded expression on her face. Even if I were to just say "get me a book" in Japanese, there's no way she would understand. I have to dig up this vocabulary, and fast.

"Ugh, fine! '*Translation function, engaaaaage!*'" I yell.
"Maine! What are you getting so mad about?!"
"I'm not mad! I just have a headache."

Getting mad at Tory for not understanding me would be an extremely childish thing to do. …I did, though.

First off, I need to start focusing everything I've got to listening carefully to what people around me are saying and, little by little, start to memorize all of the words I hear. Between Maine's young, flexible brain and my own 22 year old college graduate's intuition, memorizing vocabulary should be easy… in theory. At the very least, if I think back on what I went through when I was learning other languages so that I could read foreign books, it wasn't unmanageably difficult. The zeal and love with which I dedicated myself to my books was enough to drive other people away.

"…Are you angry because you still have a fever?" asks Tory. She reaches her hand towards my forehead, probably to feel my temperature. Without thinking, I grab her filthy hand before she can touch me.

“I’m still sick, won’t you get sick too?” I ask. Although I’m pretending to show concern for my sister, I’m really just trying to stop her from doing something disgusting. I really don’t want Tory to touch me with those filthy hands, so I’m employing this adult technique to avoid it.

“Oh, I guess so. Take care!”

Safe. If she were clean, she’d be a great older sister, but right now I don’t want to be touched at all. If this is the situation I’m in, then I’m going to have to pound the concept of hygiene into their skulls. If I don’t start improving things around here, I don’t think I’ll be able to survive. According to these memories, Maine has always been a weak child, and was bedridden and feverish far too often. I have too many memories of this bed.

If I’m going to be able to read to my heart’s content, I need to first make sure that I’m healthy and that my environment is sanitary. This family is way too poor, so if I get sick nobody will be able to call a doctor. Even if they did, from the looks of this place I can’t imagine they’d be any good, so I definitely don’t want to have to be in their care.

Mother calls from another room. “Tory, come help me with dinner!” “Yes, mother,” says Tory, and runs away with a pitter-patter.

Judging from the angle of the sunlight that streams through the window, it probably is time to start dinner preparations. Tory looks like she should still be in elementary school, but already she’s helping out a lot with the housework. What a state of poverty this is, for children to be relied on for manual labor.

“Ugh, this is bad…”

The thought of what my life will be like when I grow up is really depressing. No matter how I think about it, I’m going to be stuck doing housework forever. I’m not going to very much time for reading. Housework was already a huge bother when I was still in Japan with all of its convenient appliances; is a useless woman like me who spends all her time reading even able to adapt to life like this?

Bang! Bang! An intermittent, lively sound reverberates through the room. Mom said it was time to work on preparing dinner, so that’s probably the sound of cooking, but what in the world is happening out there? I can’t see anything from where I am, but at the same time I really don’t want to know that badly.

I have to stay positive! I'm not going to waste this reincarnation. There are books here to read that I could have never read on Earth! My first order of business is to take care of my physical condition. With that decided, I slowly close my eyes.

"I'm home!"
"Hi, Father!"

I hear clanging sounds, like metal plates rubbing against each other. My father has returned home, just in time for dinner. Maine is still too feverishly sick to eat, so I gradually drift off to the sounds of the happy family meal in the other room. As my mind slips into the dark, there's only one thought on my mind.

Ah, I don't care what it is, I just want to read a book.

Chapter 3
Home Exploration

After three days, my fever finally went away, and I've slowly recovered enough to be able to keep some food down. What I've been eating has been finely chopped vegetables floating in bland soup. It's okay for now since I've been sick, but I don't think I'll be able to stand it once I'm healthy again. Also, I'm pretty used to being called Maine by now. I'm going to have to live as Maine for the rest of my life, so I need get used to it quickly.

"Maine, you done?" asks Tory as she comes in to check on me.
"Yeah."

I hand my empty dishes over to her, and quietly lie back down on my bed.

"Get some rest, Maine."

In these last three days, I haven't even left this room! I've only ever gotten up to use the restroom, and after that I'm always brought right back to bed. Isn't that too harsh? On top of that, I said "restroom", but it's really just a chamber pot kept in the bedroom. It's extremely embarrassing! Also, not only does the rest of the family use this same chamber pot, but when they're done, they just fling the contents out the window! And, of course, there's no bath, either! I couldn't stand it after a while and tried to wipe myself clean, and everyone looked at me as if I'd gone instane. This lifestyle… I can't take it anymore!!

It's not like I can do anything about it, though. As a very young, sick child, even if I were to run away, there's no way I'd be able to live the kind of life I'd want. I still have the mind of an adult, so this much is obvious. I'm not going to heedlessly run away, no matter how much I hate this situation. Judging from what I've seen in here so far, I don't think the outside is going to be much better. I have no idea if there's any child protection services or shelters or anything like that around here, and even if there were I don't know if they'd be any improvement over this place.

If I run away from the filth here, all that'll happen is that I'll spend my last few days running around the streets, getting covered in falling waste, and finally dying on the

side of the road. What I need to do is focus on getting better so that I can then work on improving the conditions around here.

My first goal is to get well enough that I can get out of bed without people being mad at me. ……Well, it's a start.

Then, before anything else: books. The first step towards improving my environment is definitely finding books. If I have a book, then I'll be able put up with all of these grievances. I'll persevere! And, so, I have decided that today I'm going to go explore this house. I've gone too long without reading a book; I'm starting to feel the edges of withdrawal.

Give me a book! Raaagh! I'll cry! A grown woman will burst into tears in public!

Since I've got an older sister, I should be able to find around ten picture books somewhere in here. Unless I'm mistaken, I don't think I actually know how to read this language, but at least I can look at the pictures and try to puzzle out the meanings of each word.

The door opens quietly, and Tory sticks her head in. "Maine, you sleeping?" she whispers. I lie quietly in my bed, and she nods in satisfaction. Every time I've woken up, I've slipped out of bed in search of a book, only to collapse as I wandering around, so Tory has taken it upon herself to keep a close watch on me. When our mother leaves in the morning to go to work, she leaves Tory in charge of my care. Tory has been desperately trying to keep me in bed, and with my tiny body, no matter how much I try to run I can never break free from her grip.

"I am absolutely going to *'dominate'* you," I mutter.
"What was that?" asks Tory.
"…Hm? Oh, I just want to get big."

Not really understanding the real meaning behind my answer, Tory gives me a troubled smile. "If you get healthy again, you'll get bigger! You're always so sick that you're not eating, so even though you're five, people still think that you're three."

Oh, am I five, then? With an atypically frail build. This is the first I've heard of it. I can't remember any birthday parties, so I couldn't figure it out for myself. Or, maybe, could there have been parties that I just don't recognize, since I don't know the language very well?

“Tory,” I ask, “Are you big?”
“I’m six, but everyone thinks I’m seven or eight, so maybe I’m a little big?”
“Ahh.”

We’re only a year apart, but what a difference in physique. Surpassing her might be extremely difficult, but I can’t give up just yet. I’m going to eat right, take care of my hygiene, and get healthy.

“Mom’s gone to work,” says Tory, “so I need to wash the dishes. Really, don’t get out of bed! If you don’t sleep, you won’t get better, and if you don’t get better, you won’t grow any bigger!” “Okay!”

In preparation for sneaking out, I’ve been playing the good kid ever since last night so that Tory will let down her guard a little bit. I’ve been waiting patiently ever since for her to finally leave me alone and go somewhere else.

“Right, I’m going now. Be good and stay here, okay?”
“Okaaay!” I answer, the picture of obedience.

Tory closes the door with a clack. I wait quietly as she grabs the box full of dirty dishes and heads out the door. I don’t know where she goes to wash the dishes, but she’s always gone for about twenty to thirty minutes. It looks like each home doesn’t have its own water supply, so there’s probably a well or fountain for public use.

Heh heh heh… Now, get out!!

From what I think is the entranceway, I hear the clunk of a turning lock, followed by the fading sound of Tory’s footsteps on the stairway. I wait until I can’t hear her at all anymore, then quietly get out of my head. I grimace as I feel the grit of the floor bite into my bare feet. Walking around barefoot in a house where everyone wears shoes is profoundly disgusting, but Tory, in an attempt to stop me from walking around, hid my shoes, so I have no choice. Searching for a book is my top priority, I have no time to worry about the defilement of my feet.

“If they’re in here after all, I might have spoke too soon…”

In this bedroom where my feverish self has been locked away, there are two beds, three wooden boxes full of clothing and other miscellaneous things, and a few baskets

with other sundry items. In the basket next to my bed, there's a few toys made from wood and straw, but no books. If there's a bookshelf, it would probably be in the living room.

"Yyyuck…"

With every step I take, the gritty floor grinds into the soles of my feet. It's customary here to walk around the house with shoes on, so I know that even if I want to complain, it's not going to do very much good. Even still, the customs of Japan have been so thoroughly ingrained in me that it's going to be next to impossible to adapt. If I'm going to keep living as Maine, though, there are a lot of things I'm going to have to get used to.

"Grr, too high…"

I've hit the first major obstacle in my home exploration: the bedroom door. It's not as if I can't reach the knob at all; if I stand on my tiptoes and reach as high as I can go, my fingertips just barely brush the bottom of it. Turning it, however, is a much bigger problem. I glance around the room, looking for something to use as a stool. My gaze settles on the wooden box my clothes are stored in.

"Hnnnngh!"

If I were an adult, moving this box would be a piece of cake, but no matter how hard I push and pull, my little hands can't budge it. I could maybe flip over the basket that holds my toys, but it doesn't look like it would be able to support my weight.

"Man, I've got to get bigger soon; there's too much I can't do right now."

After looking around the bedroom some more and thinking over my options, I decided to try folding up my parents' bedding and standing on that. There's absolutely no way that I'd let my own bedding touch this grimy floor that people walk on with boots, but my parents are used to living in conditions like this so it's absolutely fine to use theirs. If it's for the sake of finding a book, making my parents a little upset is no big deal at all.

"Hup!"

Standing on tiptoes on top of the folded bedding

I stand on my tiptoes on top of the folded bedding and grab the doorknob. I twist with the entire weight of my body, and the knob turns. The door swings open with a creak… right towards me.

“Wha?!”

The door swings right towards my head with great force. I frantically let go of the knob, and stumble backwards.

“Who-o-o-o-a!”

With a clatter, I tumble off of the piled-up bedding and hit my head.

“Ow…”

I clutch my head as I rise to my feet. I notice that the door is still slightly ajar! My headache is only just another sacrifice to the cause.

“I did it! It’s open!”

I leap forward, stick my fingers into the crack, and pull the door the rest of the way open. I see that my parents’ mattress has slid across the floor, and it’s left a clean track behind it… but I’ll pretend not to notice for now.

“Aha, the kitchen!”

I leave the bedroom and find myself in a kitchen. “Kitchen” in the modern sense of the word might be a little, generous; this really looks more like an old-style cookhouse. In the corner I see a stove, with a cast iron pot sitting on top, and something that looks like a frying pan hung up on the wall next to it. A clothesline runs across the room, from which a grimy-looking cleaning rag hangs. Anyone trying to wipe something off with that rag is surely only going to make it worse.

“It’s no wonder I’ve got a weak constitution with sanitation like this…”

In the center of the room is a somewhat small table, two three-legged stools, and a box that seems to be being used as another stool. On the right side of the room is a wooden cabinet, probably being used as a cupboard. In the corner opposite the stove

sits a large basket, filled with raw vegetables that look almost like potatoes and onions. There's a sink here as well, with a large jug of water next to it. The sink is probably filled by pouring water from the jug; it looks like there really isn't running water here.

As I finish looking around the room, I notice two more doors besides the one leading back to the bedroom.

"Ohoho, which one is the right one?"

This kitchen really doesn't look like the kind of place where I'd find a bookshelf, so I open one of the other doors that head out of the kitchen.

"Hm, a storage room?"

Beyond the door is a room that's crammed full of a mess of tools and things that I've never seen before. Everything's on shelves, but things are piled on them so haphazardly that it doesn't look like anything in here is used very much at all.

"Wrong one, huh…"

I give up on this room and head over to the second door. I reach up and pull on the knob, but the lock only clunks dully against the frame. I rattle the door again and again, but there's no sign of it giving way at all.

"Don't tell me, this is the door Tory went through…? Eh? Both were wrong?! Neither were right?!"

Suddenly perplexed, I mumble aloud to myself. This is a two-bedroom apartment with a kitchen… but no bath, no toilet, no running water, and *no bookshelves*. No matter how hard I look, I can't find another room.

Hey, God, do you have a grudge?!

In all of the light novels out there about reincarnation, the vast majority of them dropped the protagonist amongst the rich and noble, and very few of the remainder place her in abject poverty. I have the memories and sensibilities of a modern-day citizen of Japan; there is no way I'm going to be able to live in a house with no bath, no toilet, no running water.

On top of that, the thing that I was most worried about: I can't find any books. I looked all through the storage room and couldn't find anything even remotely resembling a book.

"…No way, are books expensive?"

On Earth, before the invention of machines that could print books easily, books were ridiculously expensive. If you weren't a member of the highest echelons of society, your opportunities to read books were few and far between.

"I've got no choice. If it's come to this, right now, I need to find *words*."

Even if I don't have any books, it's still possible for me to start learning to read. There could be newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, calendars, even advertisements! There absolutely has to be something around here that has at least one word written on it somewhere.

At least, there would be in Japan.

"…Nothing! Absolutely nothing! Not a single thing! What kind of house is this?!"

I have gone through every item on every shelf of the storage room and the cupboard, and not only have I, of course, still not found any books, but there hasn't been so much as a single letter printed on anything at all. Printing aside, I can't even find a single piece of paper!

"What the heck is… this…"

Blinding pain blasts through my head, as if my fever had come roaring back. My heart pounds in my chest, and I am deafened by the sudden ringing in my ears. I crumple to the floor, as if the strings holding me up were suddenly cut. My eyes are so hot.

Dying, crushed by books, had been my dream; being reincarnated, well, that's okay too. But how am I supposed to live like this? What am I to live for? I hadn't even thought that I could be reborn into a world without books. Why was I even born?!

Tears run down my face as I struggle to find a reason to keep living.

“Maine!! What are you doing up?! You shouldn’t have gotten out of bed without your shoes!” shouts Tory, as she walks into the kitchen to find me crumpled on the ground.

“…Tory… there’s no *'books'*…”

Even though I want to read so badly, there’s no books. I have no idea why, or even how, I’m going to keep living on.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” asks Tory, concerned, as I lay there with tears constantly streaming from my eyes. There’s no way for me to explain. She can’t even see that not having books is a problem, how could she understand my feelings?

I want a book.

I want to *read*.

Hey, is there even anyone out there who would understand?

Where can I find a book?

Please, someone tell me.

Chapter 4
Town Exploration

Yesterday, I cried, and cried, and cried. When my parents called me for dinner, and even when they got mad at me for getting their bedding so dirty, the only reaction I could muster was more weeping. This morning, my eyes are hot and puffy from crying too much, and my head is pounding. However, my fever has gone away completely, and my body no longer feels sluggish and heavy. All that crying seems to have cleared away my foul mood as well.

After breakfast with my family, my mother fussed over my puffy face.

"Ah, your fever's gone."

With hands still cold from washing up, she feels my forehead, then rubs at the corners of my eyes. The coolness of her touch feels amazing.

"Say, Maine," says my mother, "now that you're well, would you like to help with the shopping today?"
"Huh? Mommy, what about work? My fever's gone now, so is it okay for you to not go to work?"

Didn't she say something earlier, like… "Work at the dyer's shop is unbelievably busy right now, so even though Maine has a fever, I can't take any time off"? She's a working woman! Is this okay?

She looks at me, with my head cocked curiously to one side, then looks down sadly.

"Tory has been taking care of almost all of your nursing, and I thought it was such a shame that I wasn't letting her go outside even a little… but yesterday, you were crying and crying, and Tory got so concerned. She said that she thought you might have started crying because you were so lonely, so she went around and begged our neighbors to help me take some time off."

At those words, my breath caught in my throat. I, a woman with the mental maturity of a twenty-two-year-old, spent an entire day crying, without even bothering to think of what anyone around me would think. I'm so ashamed that I want to go dig a hole

and bury myself in it. Now that I've finally calmed down, what I did seems so unbelievably embarrassing.

"I'm… I'm… sorry…" I stammer.
"You don't need to apologize, Maine. Being sick makes everyone feel a little helpless."

My mother gently strokes my head to comfort me. Her gentleness only makes my feelings of guilt crash down on me even harder.

I'm so sorry. I was crying out of despair from realizing that there were no books, not at all because I was lonely because you were gone. Going looking for books as soon as Tory left the house… I don't know what I was thinking. I'm truly, truly sorry.

"Tory's going with everyone to the forest nearby," says my mother, "but I don't want you to push yourself when you've only just gotten better. How about coming with me and doing some shopping?"
"Yeah!" I reply.
"Oh! You cheered up quickly."

My mother smiles happily at me, probably thinking that I'm overjoyed to spend some time with her.

I grin back at her. "It's gonna be fun!"

My mother looks so happy, so I'm in no hurry to tell her this, but the real reason for my mood swing was the realization that if I went outside, I might be able to get something to read. If I come along to go shopping, I might even be able to get my mother to buy me a book! It doesn't have to be a really thick one. For now, all I want is something that will help me learn the writing system. A workbook or something like that, aimed at kids, would be perfect. Maybe even just a chart with all of the letters on it!

I'm positive that if I smile cutely and say something like, "I won't get lonely if I have a book! I'll be a good girl and stay inside and help with the chores," then my mother will eventually cave to the begging of her adorable, frail little girl and buy me a picture book. Eh heh heh. This is going to be fun indeed.

“Mom, I’m heading out,” says Tory, peeking into the bedroom with a huge smile on her face. Since our mother has the day off today, Tory, who would ordinarily be stuck watching me, has the day off as well.

“Alright, go meet up with everyone. Take care out there!” says our mother.
“Yes, Mom!”

Tory slings a big wicker basket over her back like a backpack, then takes off with a spring in her step. She’s acting like she’s going to go play with her friends, but in reality this is yet another chore. She’s gathering firewood! While she’s at it, she’ll also be looking out for nuts, berries, and mushrooms to bring back with her. Whether our next few meals will be tasty or bland depends entirely on Tory.

You can do it, Tory! Spice up my life!

Children in this world seem to be put to work helping out with the chores very early in this world. It seems like there aren’t any schools in this world, in addition to everything else that’s missing. At the very least, I didn’t see anything that looked like a school at all when I was digging through my memories. Tory’s starting to grow up a little bit, so it looks like she’s starting to work as an apprentice.

If I can, I’d like to do my apprenticeship under a librarian, or maybe even at a bookstore. Today will be a perfect day for me to gather some information while we’re out and about. I’ll figure out where the bookstore is, then make friends with the shopkeeper, and eventually become their apprentice. Hey, it’s okay to be impressed by the cunning of this little girl, heh heh.

“Now then, Maine, shall we head out as well?”

This will be my first time leaving this building since I became Maine! The first time I’ve worn clothing that wasn’t just pajamas, too. These clothes are worn-out hand-me-downs as well, but they’re a little thicker, and I’ve been bundled up in countless layers. I’m so fluffy that it’s hard to move! It would seem that it’s cold outside.

I reach up to take my mother’s hand, and follow her, for the first time, outside.

Cold!
Cramped!!
Stinky!!!

The buildings are all made of stone, and it feels like their walls are sucking what little heat there is out of the air. Despite all of the clothes that I'm bundled in, the frigid air seeps through immediately, chilling me to the bone.

I'd give anything for some Heat-Tech, or some fleece, or even one of those chemical warmer things. While I'm wishing, I want a face mask, too! Something to block this stench and stop me from getting sick again.

Immediately outside the house is a stairway. A stairway so steep and narrow that I, stuck with the athletic ability of a three-year-old, am terrified of taking even the first step. My mother pulls on my hand, and we go down, with the warped boards creaking beneath our feet as we turn and turn and turn. After about two stories, though, the wooden stairs are replaced by sturdy, well-maintained stone.

This is the same building… why's there such a difference?

My face may be screwed up against the cold and stench, but I'm finally outside. By my estimation, I think our house is on the fifth floor of this seven-story building. Honestly, with my tiny body, weak constitution, and general lack of strength, even just going outside is heavy labor by itself. I guess it's only natural that most of Maine's memories are of being indoors.

"Haaahh, haaahhhh… Mommy, I can't… breathe… Slow down!"

We've only just started, and already I'm completely out of breath. I'm so weak that I have no idea if I'll even be able to drag myself to our destination without collapsing in the street.

"We've only just left the house! Are you okay?"
"Yeah. I'm okay. Let's go."

At the very least, I want to figure out where the bookstore is. As I take some time to catch my breath, I take a look around my surroundings. Right outside our apartment building is something like a small plaza, centered on a public water well. The area immediately around the well has been paved with stone, and it's full of old ladies chatting while they scrub away at their laundry. This must be the place where Tory goes to do the dishes, and where that big water jug gets filled up every morning.

“Mommy, did you do the laundry?” I ask.
“I did! It’s all done already.”

These clothes still look a little dirty, but they’ve apparently been washed. Perhaps the detergent here isn’t very good… I’m going to have to think about making some soap, too.

The plaza is surrounded on all sides by other tall apartment buildings, with a single road leading out to the rest of the town. We make our way along that narrow street, turn the corner, and find ourselves in an enormous main avenue.

Whoa, the streets of a foreign country…

The unfamiliar townscape stretches out before me. Pack animals, vaguely like horses or donkeys, clop along the cobbled roads, passing the merchants’ stalls that fill both sides of the streets.

“Mommy,” I ask, “What store are we going to?”
“Hmm, Maine, what are you saying? We’re going to the town market, you know? We don’t usually go to the shops.”

It seems like the neatly-kept shops set up in the first floor of these buildings are usually frequented by people who actually have money, and lowly commoners like us usually don’t have any need to go there. Instead, the daily shopping seems to be done at the town’s market.

…So, does that mean that the bookstore is going to be a shop in one of these buildings, then?

As I look around, searching for any sign of a bookstore, I catch sight of an impressively large building, which looks like a local landmark. It’s simply built, but its off-white stone walls radiate majesty and draw the eye to it.

“Oh, a castle?” I ask, pointing at the building.
“That’s the temple, you know? When you’re seven, you’ll be going there to get baptized.”

Ah, a church. A church, hmm. I really dislike the obligations of religion. I’d really rather not get anywhere near there, if I can help it.

Thanks to my modern Japanese sensibilities, I want to keep my distance from religion. I'm not sure how acceptable that's going to be in this world, though, so I bite back my objections. Instead, I turn my attention to the walls I see beyond the temple.

"Mommy, what about those walls?"
"Those are castle ramparts," she says. "The lord of the land makes his home in there, as do the rest of the nobility. We don't really have much business there, though."
"Hmmm…"

I can't see anything besides tall, stone walls, so from here it looks less like a castle and more like a prison. Maybe they're built like that so that they're fortified against outside attack? For some reason, when I think of European-style castles, I imagine them to be really luxurious. Ah, although, I guess it does kind of look like a castle that also needed to be a fortress.

"So, what's that wall?"
"That's the outer wall. It protects this district from the outside world. If you keep going straight along this road, you'll find a gate going outside. Your dad's probably working there right now."
"…Daddy?"

From Maine's memories, I know that my father is some kind of soldier, but I didn't know he was a gate guard. More importantly, though, the lord's castle is built like a fortress and surrounded both by ramparts and the outer walls. Based on that, I wonder if I should be thinking of this place as a city? Judging by the size of the walls surrounding this district and the stampede of people that fills this street, this doesn't seem to be a fairly large district, but I'm comparing it to, say, Tokyo or Yokohama, and I don't know how valid that comparison really is.

Aaaaargh, the size of a bookstore depends on the size of the city, and I don't even have a basis for comparison! Is this district big? Is it small?! Please, tell me, O great teacher!

"Maine, let's get going," says my mother. "If we don't get to the market soon, all the good things will be gone!"
I nod. "Okay."

As we walk, I keep my eyes peeled, constantly on the lookout for any sign of a bookstore. Strangely enough, I notice that the signs advertising the shops that line the

streets are all illustrated. There's wooden signs with images painted on them, and metal signs with graphics engraved or beaten into them, but I have yet to see a single thing that looks like a written word. These signs are all designed so that even someone like me, who can't read at all, can understand them easily, which has made searching for a bookstore really easy, but… I suddenly have a terrifying thought.

Huh? Is there anything written down here at all? Not just in our house, but in this entire district? Maybe the literacy rate is low? …Maybe, writing hasn't even been invented yet?!

The color drains from my face as I realize the ramifications of this idea. I'd never even bothered to think that writing itself might not exist. If the written word hasn't been discovered, after all, books just don't exist.

"Maine, there's lots of people out here. Don't fall behind!" says my mother, chidingly.
"…Yeah," I say in a small voice.

I'm barely conscious of the movement of my feet as I struggle to hold back my terror, so we arrive at the market before I know it. The chattering of a crowd unexpectedly assaults my ears, and I lift my head to see a bustling square, packed with carts, stalls, and people milling about. It kind of reminds me of the crowds you'd see at festivals back in Japan, and for a second I feel strangely nostalgic.

Suddenly, I spot something at a nearby fruit stand that I had given up all hope of seeing. My eyes go wide and I start grinning uncontrollably, and I tug on my mother's skirt to get her attention.

"Mommy, look! There's something *'written'* there!!"

Wooden signs have been fixed to each basket of merchandise, and written upon them are some sort of glyphs. I can't read them, so I don't know if they're numbers or letters, but one thing's for sure: writing does indeed exist here. Just from seeing this one thing, blood rushes to my face, and I'm keenly aware of how hungry I've been for *writing*.

"Oh, that's the price. That's there so that you know how much you'll need to pay if you buy it."
"But it's written!!" I exclaim.

My mother must be confused as to why I've suddenly become so energetic, but that doesn't matter right now. As we walk around, I have her read off every single number I can find, and I focus as hard as I can on matching the numbers to the symbols.

All right, all right! Come on, my synapses!!

"So, is this one thirty lions?" I ask.

After a while of having numbers read to me, I cut in and read one out loud on my own, then look up at my mother for her reaction. It looks like I'm right: my mother is looking down at me, blinking in astonishment.

"That's amazing, Maine, you picked that up so quickly!"
"Heh heh…"

There are ten numerals, so it looks like the counting system is in base 10. I'm really glad it's not in base 2, or base 60, or anything else like that. Now that I know what symbols are attached to which numbers, performing calculations should be a piece of cake.

Ah, could it be, have I tripped the Genius flag? Although, that *is* the kind of flag that says I'll be a prodigy at ten, merely talented at fifteen, and then just ordinary after I hit twenty…

Chapter 5
Books: Impossible to acquire

"Now then, last on the list is meat. We're going to get a lot of it, and then we're going to need to salt it, or maybe smoke it…"

My mother, finished with buying our fruits and vegetables, heads towards the center of the market. There, it seems like the meat sellers are lined up against the outer wall.

"Why are we buying so much?" I ask.
"We have to prepare for winter, you know?" replies my mother. "Around this time of year, the farmers all have to bring their livestock in for the year. Anything that won't make it through the winter gets butchered, so this time of the year is when the most meat is sold. The animals have also been eating a lot to prepare for winter, so their meat is very fatty and delicious."
"…Umm, in the winter, does the market go away too?"
"Of course it does, you know? There aren't very many vegetables gathered during the winter, so the market isn't open very often."

Now that I think about it, it's obvious, but the thought hadn't occurred to me at all. In Japan, before greenhouse cultivation became commonplace, vegetables were sold seasonally, and before distribution methods were developed, they were all grown locally. You can keep food fresh for long periods of time with freezers or refrigerators, but before those things existed, you needed to actually preserve the food in your house.

"…I've never actually prepared for winter," I mumble.
"Did you say something?" asks my mother.
"Nuh-uh."

Preserving food at home, huh… Where in that tiny apartment are we going to preserve anything? That storage room isn't nearly big enough, right? Man, I'm glad that I'm a such a little girl; I'm so small that I'd only get in the way if I tried to help, so I'm not going to be scolded when I don't.

"…Erk, it stinks!"
"That's the smell of meat!"

The stench grows unbearable as we approach the butchers. I pinch my nose to stop the smell, but my mother keeps walking forward, looking like this was nothing out of the ordinary.

Meat's *supposed* to smell like this? Ughhh, I've got a bad feeling about this…

Even though my nose is plugged, the air is so foul that the very taste of it makes my eyes water as I finally arrive at the row of butchers' shops. On the counters, aside from the bacon and ham I expected, legs of meat are lined up, still attached to the feet and recognizable as animal parts. Inside the shop, dead animals, drained of blood, swing from the rafters. Bunnies and birds line the shelves, their eyes wide open and their tongues lolling out of their mouths.

"Gyaaaaaaah!!" I scream.
"What's wrong, Maine?!"

To be honest, for someone like me, who's only ever seen raw meat after it's already been completely disassembled, cut up into little pieces, and put in packs, the butchers' shops of this world are a little too over-stimulating. All the hairs on my body stand on end, tears stream down my face, and I screw my eyes shut to block out the awful sight. The single glimpse I caught, though, remains fixated with my mind, and won't go away no matter how much I want to forget it.

"Maine? Maine?!"

My mother shakes me side to side. At that instant, a pig screams as its dissection begins, and my eyes snap open. Smiling people have gathered around me, watching and waiting eagerly as an animal is murdered right in front of them.

Why do you look like this is fun, people? Why are you smiling so much?! Stop it! Stop it stop it! This is terrifying!!

"Urkh……"

The pig squeals out one final time as the knife rams home. My own small cry joins it, and I faint on the spot.

Something's being poured into my mouth. It's a harsh, astringent, *extremely* stimulating liquid that smells like strong alcohol. Since I'm not quite awake enough to drink it properly, it flows straight down my windpipe. I leap to my feet, my eyes wide open, and start an enormous coughing fit.

"Cough! Cough! Cough!"

Is this actual alcohol?! What unbelievable idiot would dare force such a powerful spirit down the throat of such a helpless and innocent young child?! What would you do if I'd gotten alcohol poisoning?!

My mother is next to me, holding a bottle of alcohol.

"Maine, are you awake? Ahh, that's a relief, I'm so glad that I could wake you up."
"*Cough!* …Mommy?!"

With a huge sigh of relief, my mother hugs me tightly. I might not be very good at putting things into words at the moment, but I can speak my mind now, right?

Don't shove such a strong alcohol down the throat of a small child!! And especially do not do so to a child who not only has a weak constitution, but has also just finally recovered from a fever so high that you thought she would die!! Are you trying to kill me?! Are you an idiot?! Do you want me to die?!

"Alright then, Maine. Now that you're awake, let's go back and get that meat."
"What?!"

A shudder ripples through me. That horrifying spectacle has already been seared into my memory. It flashes before my eyes like a daydream, and just the memory of it gives me goosebumps. I do not want to go back there. This woman, she used strong alcohol to revive a young girl, and now she's taking the girl who literally just fainted at the sight of the butcher and dragging her *back* to the butcher… could it be that she's a brute?

"…Ummmm, I still don't feel good," I say. "I'm gonna stay here. Mommy, go ahead!"

“Eh? But…”

I give my hesitant mother a sidelong glance, then spin in place to face the lady running the shop. I need to secure my position before she drags me away.

“Excuse me, but could you let me wait here?” I say to the shopkeep. “I’m not going to be any trouble, I’ll just sit right here.”
“Oh, you’re very level-headed for such a little girl,” she replies, with a dry, crackling laugh. “Your mother did just buy some liquor, so I’ll let you stay for a bit. It would be awful if I kicked out a little girl who wasn’t feeling well and she had another accident, right? Take care of your shopping, ma'am, I’ll watch her for you.”

It seems that this woman is the proprietor of this liquor stall, from where my mother just bought the alcohol she used to revive me. The old man from the general store next door seems to have taken pity on me as well, and he waves me over.

“Come and wait over here, missy, that way nobody’ll come by and try to snatch ya…”

He motions me to a spot behind and between the two stalls and helps me sit down. It feels like the liquor that was poured down my throat is churning around inside me. Right now, moving around too much would be dangerous. If, for instance, I were to collapse from acute alcohol poisoning, nobody else would be able to figure out why.

While sitting down, I idly look over the contents of the two shops. The liquor stand seems to have received a new shipment of cider, just in time for its most popular season, and customers come one right after the other to buy little casks of it. The general store, on the other hand, doesn’t have nearly as many customers.

Just what does a general store sell in this world?

I look over the various goods that are lined up for sale, but for the most part I have no idea what I’m looking at.

“Mister, what’s thiiis?” I ask, pointing at one of the random things on a nearby shelf.
“Oh, have you not used one of these before, little missy? This is what you use when you’re weavin’ cloth. Oh, and this one’s used for huntin’.”

Since he doesn’t have any customers at the moment, the old man gladly explains what each thing does as I point at it in succession. There’s so much stuff here that’s used in

daily life around here that I just don't know anything about. I dig through Maine's memories, but she either wasn't very interested in these things or she never really learned about them.

As I look around the items jumbled on the shelves in admiration, I notice something in the far corner. It may be just a single volume, but I definitely see the spine of some massive, bulky tome. It's the kind of binding that I'd usually only see behind a glass case in a library, with a leather cover and fine gold caps on each of the corners. It's so huge that I don't think I'd be able to even hold it.

…That's a book! That, don't tell me, that's a book, right?!

The instant I laid eyes on the spine of that book, color blasted back into my world. The heavy clouds that had weighed down on my mind were instantly driven away, and my very spirit was brightened in a moment.

"M… mister!! What's this?! What do you call this?!"
"Ahh, that's a book!"

Yessss! I finally found one! Books, they exist! It might just only be one, but they exist!

This book has scoured away my lingering depression from having been reborn into a world without any books. I tremble with emotion as I gaze longingly at its spine. It is absolutely too heavy for me to move, so it would merely be an ornament. From the looks of it, there's no way that it isn't prohibitively expensive, and there's no way that I'll be able to get my mother to buy it for me, no matter how much I pester her about it. However, if books like this exist, then there must be smaller, easier-to-carry books out there as well. I spin around to face the old man, eyes wide with raw hunger.

"Hey, mister, where can I find a store that sells books?"
"A store for books? There's no store like that." He gives me a what-the-hell-is-this-kid-talking-about look, and my excitement drops down a couple of notches. There's books, so why are there no bookstores?
"…Huh? Why? You're selling one here."
"Books are only made when people transcribe them from the author's original work, so they're far too rare and valuable to just sell on the market. Even this one here ain't actually for sale, it's bein' held as collateral for someone in the aristocracy. Well, if he don't come back soon, I guess I'll have to sell it, but the buyer'll probably be another aristocrat."

Aristocrats!! If I were actually following the reborn-into-a-parallel-universe trope, I would have been born into the nobility! I would be able to read! Why am I just a commoner?!

Thoughts of slaughtering the aristocracy flash through my mind. They're surrounded by books from the minute they're born. What have they done to deserve such a blessing?

"Little missy, is this the first book you've ever seen?"

I tear my eyes away from the book, nodding vigorously in reply to the old man's question. Yes, this is the first book I've ever seen in this world. On top of that, they're not usually for sale, and there's no bookstores, and there's a very good chance that such a chance encounter may never ever happen again. …and, so!!

"M… mister!! Please, hear me out!"

With my fists clasped tightly together, I stand straight up, then fall to my knees in front of the shopkeeper. "What's all this now?" he says, wide-eyed in surprise as I kneel before him.

This isn't just an idle wish. What I need to demonstrate to this man is that this is the foundation at the heart of my foundation, and the most sincere demonstration in the world is begging on your hands and knees. I bow my head sharply, and do my best to explain my feelings as clearly and frankly as I can.

"It may be obvious that I cannot buy that book, but, at least, let me touch it! Let me rub my face against it! At the very least, let me sniff it, let me breathe in the scent of its ink! Just that would be enough!!"

…The silence that filled the air after my heartfelt request was almost to painful to bear, yet the shopkeeper gave no reply. Timidly, I raise my head to look up at him. For some reason, he looks like he's swallowed a bug, or maybe like he's spotted some unbelievably disgusting pervert. Shock and disgust play across his face as he looks down at me.

Huh? Did my sincerity fail to shine through?

“I… don’t know if I’m really understandin’ what you mean, but… I think it might be dangerous for me to let you touch that.”
“B… but?!”

I start to reiterate my passionate request, but my time is apparently up.

“Maine, I’m done!” says my mother. “Let’s head home.”
“Mommy…”

Tears start falling from my eyes as soon as I hear her voice. The book’s right there, but I’ll never touch it. I’ll never smell it.

“What’s wrong, Maine?” she asks me, concerned. A dangerous look flashes across her face, and she spins around to face the shopkeeper. “What did you do to her?!”
I jump between them and shake my head vigorously. “N… nothing! Nothing!” If I don’t clear this misunderstanding up immediately, then I’d be just heaping more problems on the kind old man who let me take shelter in his shop and taught me about books. That’s no way to return a favor.

“I don’t feel too good. Mommy, what did you make me drink? I’ve been feeling really funny since I woke up.”
“……Ahhh, maybe the liquor I used to wake you up was a little too effective. Let’s get you home, get you some water, and get you a nice quiet place to rest. You’ll be all right.”

My mother nods her head in understanding, but it doesn’t look like she’s thinking at all about whether or not it was a bad idea to have given alcohol to a child in the first place. She takes my hand, and with a tug starts pulling me back towards home. I look behind me as I walk away, and smile my biggest smile at the two shopkeepers.

“Thanks for letting me sit down!”

I didn’t bow, like I’m accustomed to, but not because I’m emotionally compromised. Rather, I don’t remember actually seeing anyone bowing their heads, so I don’t think that’s the custom here. For now, I’ll just keep smiling. A great smile is indispensable when dealing with other people, and from the way they’re smiling and waving back, it looks like my guess was correct.

“Maine, are you still feeling bad?” asks my mother.

"…Yeah."

We don't say very much as we trudge home, hand in hand. I look at the shops along our route home, and, of course, there aren't any bookstores. My goal for today of coercing my mother into getting me a children's book and maybe learning a few letters has ended in complete failure. Even though this city is home to the lord of the land, even though we are surrounded by such spectacular walls, there's no bookstore here. If books truly aren't for sale, even here, then there might not be a bookstore anywhere in the world.

I'm in despair. I had never thought that God could be so cruel as to force me, Urano Motosu, the book enthusiast who could go a day or two without eating as long as she had a book to read, to live a life bereft of books.

At least, why wasn't I born a noblewoman… *Sniff!* To reincarnate me as a peasant… God… what did I do to earn this hatred?

Even if I say that I want my parents to become nobility so that they can buy me books, those are just childish fantasies. I'd never say that I don't want to have been born into this family. Really, though, I want to be an aristocrat. If I can't be an aristocrat, I at least want enough money to be able to buy all the books out of a disgraced aristocrat's estate.

I may be stuck in this awful environment, but I know for a fact that no matter how hard I cry, it's not going to get me a book. If there aren't any bookstores, I can't buy a book.

So, how am I going to get one?
I'm just going to have to make them myself, aren't I?

Really, what I truly want are books from this world, but that's an unreasonable luxury. In order to fulfill my most urgent desires, I'm going to have to put off learning how to read the language here. Instead, I'll make books in Japanese, which I already know.

I haven't yet figured out how I'm going to do all that, but that doesn't matter right now. I will definitely acquire a book!

Chapter 6
Interlude: My sister's gotten weird

My name's Tory. I'm six years old. I have a little sister, Maine. She's five.

Maine has straight, dark blue hair, like the color of the night sky, and golden eyes that shine like the moon. I think she's really adorable, but I am her older sister.

She's always really sick and always has a fever, so she doesn't eat much, so she hasn't grown very much. She also can't go outside very much, so her skin is pale white. She's really adorable, but I can't play with her very much, which is a little disappointing. The other kids get to play with their brothers and sisters, and I get kinda jealous.

The other day, Maine had a really bad fever. It was so bad that everyone in the family was worried, wondering if she would live or die. For three days, she didn't eat anything, and she even got so weak that she couldn't drink any water.

The fever might have made her a little strange in the head.

When she was sick, she started using words I didn't really understand and getting really mad all of a sudden. She always used to do what she was told, but when I went to go wash the dishes, she snuck out of bed and I found her crying and I don't know why. She spent the whole day crying…

I though that maybe Maine was still suffering because of her fever, but when her fever went down, she got even weirder.

Seriously, she started saying that her body felt gross and that she wanted to wipe herself off. When we boil water to cook our food, she asks if she could have some warm water for a bath. Every day!

Every day, she wets a cloth and wipes her body off. "Help me with the parts I can't reach," she says, so I help her out. On the first day, the bath water got really dirty, but by the third day, it was still pretty clean.

"You're not really dirty, so isn't taking a bath kind of a waste?" I asked, but she just said, "It's not a waste, I am dirty!"

Every day, she obsesses over making sure she washes herself off. Before I knew it, one of the corners of the bedroom had turned into her bathing space.

Then, for some reason, she decided that I should start washing myself as well when I was helping her. “Sure, why not,” I said, and started scrubbing my face. “You go outside a lot,” she said, “so you get dirtier than me.”

When I washed myself off, the water that Maine had left clean got really dirty and muddy. When I stared at all of the dirt that had been on me, I started feeling a little bit gross. Maine, though, was beaming. “If there’s two of us, it’s not a waste, right?” she said.

What will it take to make her see that it really is a waste? I have to bring all of that water up from the well, and it’s really hard! Doesn’t she know that?

After that, she suddenly started wearing her hair up. Her hair is really straight, so no matter how tightly we tie it back, it unties itself and comes down immediately, so we haven’t really been tying it back. After trying and failing to tie it back several times, Maine started to sulk. Suddenly, she got up and started rummaging around in our toy basket. She pulled out a doll that Dad had whittled out of wood and Mom had made clothes for… my most precious possession!

“Tory, can I break this off?” she asked.
“That’s my doll’s leg! Maine, that’s awful!!”

It was terrifying that my little sister could so calmly ask to break off my doll’s leg. It was too cruel. When I got mad, she hung her head and mumbled “sorry”. Sighing, she ran her fingers through her hair, pushing her bangs back. Seeing a five-year-old do something so strangely sensual made my breath stop for a moment.

“Tory, if I wanted a stick like this, what should I do?”

What Maine really wanted wasn’t my doll’s leg, it was a wooden rod. So, I got a stick from the kindling pile. Instead of letting her break my doll, I used a knife to whittle the stick down into a little rod. She had a lot of requests, like “make this part a little skinnier” or “could you round the ends off to make them less sharp”, but eventually she was satisfied.

“Thanks, Tory!”

With a big smile, Maine took the rod from me, then suddenly jammed it through her own head.

“Maine?!” I yelled, startled.

Maine started to turn the rod, which she had actually stuck through her hair, winding her hair tightly around it. Somehow, she put all of her hair up, with just that one little rod. I was surprised how firmly it stayed in place. It was like the magic the nobility uses! However, her hairstyle looked very adult.

“Maine,” I say, “you can’t put all of your hair up! Only grown-ups do that.”
“…Oh, really?”

With wide eyes, like she really didn’t know, she reached up and pulled the rod out of her hair. Immediately, her hair came undone and fell around her shoulders. Then, she grabs just the top part of her hair, and wraps it up like she did before.

“Is this okay?” she asks.
“I think so, yeah!”

After that, Maine started to always wear her hair up like that. She looks like she has a stick through her head if you look at her from the front, but she seems happy with it.

A little while later, Mom was able to take a day off from work, and I was finally able to go out into the forest with everyone else. I gathered a lot of firewood, and was also able to find a lot of forest mushrooms, as well as some herbs that we can use to season the meat. We need to be preparing for the winter, so all of the kids are working hard to gather things.

“I’m home,” I say, as I walk through the door. “Welcome back, Tory,” replies Mom.

“What did you get? Show me, show me!” says Maine, digging around in my basket like this was a rare and unusual thing. I did this just the other day, but Maine… yeah, when I think about it, Maine’s being weird lately.

“Aha, this! Can I have this!”

With gleaming eyes, she pulls a melia fruit out of my basket. Maine doesn’t ask for things very often, so I thought it would be okay to give her two of them.

“Thanks, Tory!” she says, beaming like an angel. She runs off into the storage room, then comes back out, looking like everything in the world is absolutely perfect.

“Maine, why are y…”

As soon as I started to speak, Maine suddenly swung a hammer and, with a thud, smashed the melia. It splits apart with a squish, and the juice inside splatters all over my face.

“……”
“……”

When you smash it with a hammer, of *course* the juices are going to splatter everywhere, you know? Surely you know that without having to think about it, right?

“So, Maine. What are you doing?” I ask, trying to put on a smile as I wipe the splattered juice from my face. With a weird sort of “whee!” noise, she jumps up with a start.

“…Ummmm, so, yeah. I wanted some oil,” she says, with a oh-no-now-I’ve-done-it sort of facial expression. She looks up at me, as if asking for help. This is definitely the face of a girl that absolutely didn’t realize that smashing something with a hammer would send pieces flying everywhere.

“If you wanted oil, you *know* there’s better ways to make it, right?! What are you doing?!”
“Oh, I see…” she says, dejectedly.

Is she really okay? Does she really not remember back when we pressed vais oil together? Oh no, maybe she had a fever for too long and she’s gone funny in the head! …I should ask Mom about this, shouldn’t I?

Afterwards, when we were in the middle of cleaning up, Mom came back inside, carrying water from the well for our dinner. Of course, she got mad. This was all

Maine's fault, but she got mad at both of us, because I wasn't a very good older sister. Right then, Maine didn't seem very adorable at all.

"Tory, Tory," she asked, "How do you make oil? Teach me?"

Since Mom was in such a huff, Maine stealthily made her way over to me to ask her question. Her sneaking was completely visible. Look, Mom's watching us right now.

"Mom," I ask, "Can I teach Maine?"
Mom sighs. "If we don't teach her, she's probably going to do something awful like this again." She points at the storage room. "Please, show her how to do it."

All of the tools we need to make oil are in the storage room, so I get a cloth and take Maine in there with me.

"…A wooden table like the one in the kitchen is just going to soak up the oils and juices, so we can't use that one. The metal table like here is better. First thing we need to do is spread a cloth out on the table. Then, we need to wrap the fruit in a cloth like this so that the pieces don't fly everywhere."

Melia fruit are edible, so we usually get the oil out of the seeds after we've finished eating. Maine, however, was very insistent that there's oil in the fruit, too.

She brought the hammer down with glee, over and over, but her aim wasn't very good, she wasn't very strong, and her posture was all wrong. She smashed up the fruit pretty well, but she wasn't able to smash any of the seeds. To make things worse, when we were done smashing up the seeds, we would need to wring the cloth out, and Maine doesn't have nearly enough strength to do that.

"Maine, that's not working. You're not smashing the seeds, you know?"
"Ooh… …Toooryyyyy…"

She looked up at me with such a pitiful expression that I decided to help out. I took the hammer from her, but it was so sticky and slippery with juice already that it nearly slipped from my hands. Sighing, I wiped off the handle, and gripped it tightly.

"This is how we do it…"

If Dad were doing this, he wouldn't be using a hammer. He'd get something really heavy to put on top of it and press the oil out of it without doing a whole lot of work. Boys are expected to do manual labor as they grow up, so they can lift heavy weights like that. I can't, though, so I had to smash those seeds one by one with a hammer.

"And now, we wring out the cloth…"
"Whoa! Tory, you're amazing!"

The oil drips into a small dish as I wring out the cloth. As Maine watches, the look of pure joy on her face is extremely adorable. My arms, however, extremely hurt.

"Thanks, Tory!" she says.
"Hey, don't run off, help me clean up!"

Maine seemed confused, like she didn't quite know what to do to help, so I helped show her how to clean up all of the tools we used.

Maine has a weak constitution and is much shorter than other kids her age, so it's easy to forget that she's already five. When she turns seven, she'll be baptized at the temple, and she'll have to find someplace to start an apprenticeship.

Not only that, but next year I'm going to be turning seven. I'm going to start my apprenticeship, so Maine's going to have to be able to do half of the housework by then. She doesn't even know where the tools go or how to clean them right now, so I don't know if she's going to be okay.

We're going to keep an eye on her health, but we have to gradually start making her help out with the housework. Otherwise, Maine as she is right now isn't really going to be able to find work. Mom's going to have to stop pampering her, and I, her big sister, am going to have to teach her everything she needs to know.

"Tory," said Maine, "Can I have some herbs too?"
"Just a little?"
"Yeah!"

With a serious face, Maine went through the herbs she took from my basket, sniffing them each and adding a few of them to her oil. She's probably trying to change the scent of it, but some of the herbs she's using are used to keep bugs away, and they'll make it too smelly to eat.

Whoa… shouldn't I get this into our food before that finishes happening?

I immediately started to try to add the melia oil to the pot, but Maine cut me off with a frantic expression.

"Tory, no! What are you doing?!"
"If we don't eat this soon," I said, "we won't be able to use it at all! These herbs are going to change the flavor so much that we're not going to be able to eat it, you know?"
"No, don't eat it!"

No matter what I said, Maine just kept shaking her head and trying to hide the bowl the oil was in. Eventually, Mom got bothered enough that she looked over at what we were doing, and she started getting angry as well.

"Maine!" she yelled. "Those are things that Tory went and gathered! Don't be selfish!"
"I'm not selfish! Tory gave these to me!"

No matter how mad Mom got, Maine still wouldn't listen. When even the two of us couldn't make her change her mind, we finally gave up, and Maine went off to wash herself off as usual.

Then, she suddenly dumped about half of the oil into her bath water and started mixing it up! Now we really couldn't eat it. And I'd spent so much trouble finding those, too!

"Maine! What are you doing!" "Eh? I'm washing, you know?"

I couldn't understand what Maine was doing, even when she tried to tell me. Lately, this has been happening more and more. As I watched, dumbfounded, Maine soaked her hair in the bucket and started to wash it. She splashed the part soaking in the water around, then started repeatedly scrubbing at the top of her head. When she seemed satisfied, she tightly wrung out all of the excess water out of her hair, then used a cloth to start drying it. When she was finished, she combed it out straight.

Her deep blue hair was suddenly so much smoother and silkier that it was positively radiant.

"…What… is this?" I ask.

“Ummm, a *"simple 2-in-1 shampoo”*.“
"Huh?”
“Do you want to use it to, Tory? If both of us use it, it won’t be a waste!”

After seeing how beautiful Maine had suddenly become, I kind of wanted to try it. I wanted to try being that beautiful.

However, I had been so mad at her just a little while ago that I felt awkward using it. Though, when Maine reminded me that I was the one who’d found the melia and pressed it for oil, the awkwardness blew away.

When you think about it like that, didn’t I do literally all of the preparation work?

Hesitantly, I undid my braid, then lowered my hair into the bucket and washed it like Maine had done. Maine helped too, and her tiny hands helped to wash the parts I missed.

“I think it’s good now?”

After drying it a bunch and combing it out, my hair was as glossy as Maine’s. Although it had always been really poofy and frizzy and impossible to comb out, now it was gentle and wavy. It’s almost like magic.

“You’re so beautiful!” says Maine. “Tory, you smell nice.”

She seems pleased, for some reason, as she combs out my hair. I was delighted that I’d become so beautiful… but, how did Maine learn how to do this?

Maine really has gotten weird. If she gets weirder like this every time she has a fever… that’s a terrifying thought.

…Although, when Mom freaked out when she saw us as we cleaned up Maine’s bucket, I started wondering what Maine would get up to next. I might be looking forward to it, just a little.

Chapter 7
Neighborhood Boys

Since I don't have any books, I'll make some myself.

Ever since I decided on that particular course of action, my mood has improved drastically, and I've been way more forward-thinking. Trouble is, there isn't a single scrap of paper in this house. This is something I know from my earlier home explorations. So, I need to go and buy paper, but I have no idea where I'd find it. Trouble is, this town doesn't have any convenience stores, hardware stores, supermarkets, or stationery shops.

Well, where the heck do I go to buy paper? The old man at the general store said that you have to copy books by hand if you want them, so I think there might be blank books available for sale. Although, where the heck do I find those? Perhaps there's a store that deals exclusively in paper.

If I were in Japan, I'd be done in an instant. I'd write everything out on loose-leaf in a binder, or in a notebook, or on stapled-together printer paper. Here, though, there's no end to my problems.

There isn't any paper in the house, so I'm going to need to start searching for some if I want to have any chance of making a book. My mother went to work this morning, so right now at home there's just Tory and me. Of course, this means there's only one person around to interrogate.

"Tory," I ask, "Do you know where to buy *'paper'*?"
"Hm? What did you say?" she replies.
"*'Paper'*! Where do I go to… oh!"

Tory looks at me quizzically, her braided hair swinging as she tilts her head to one side. This is the face of someone who doesn't understand the Japanese word I just used.

Not good. I don't know how to say "paper" in this language. Argh! I really should have asked the old guy at the general store what it was called!

"…you wouldn't know, huh?"
"Sorry, Maine," says Tory, "I guess I don't. That's a funny word, though."

I hang my head with a dramatic jerk, and let out a deep sigh. The truth is, not knowing where to buy paper is just one of my problems. I also have no idea where to find pencils or pens. Based on what I've seen of this city, I doubt anything like a mechanical pencil or a ballpoint exists. Even fountain pens might be unlikely.

Well then, what should I use a writing implement? And, of course, where should I go to find it? And, above all, I'm certainly not able to go out, by myself, in order to buy all of these materials. This really is troublesome.

"Ah!" exclaims Tory, from the kitchen. "Dad forgot this!"

I make my way over to the kitchen, where Tory is holding a bundle.

Sure enough, this looks like the thing from this morning, where our father had suddenly said "I need that thing for work, can you get it out for me" and our mother had gotten mad and shot back "why didn't you ask me earlier", then she frantically tore apart the storage room looking for it. Thinking about how mad she would be if she were to find out that our father had then forgotten that thing sends shivers down my spine.

"Tory, Mommy's going to be mad, right?"
"You think so too, Maine?"

I don't know if it's this family or this world, but people here are very forthright about their emotions. When they laugh, it's with a booming voice and an idiotic grin, and when they're mad, they burn like a raging fire. In other words, my mother's explosive anger is *terrifying*.

"Tory, should we take this to Daddy?" I ask.
"…Ummm, well, leaving you alone is, uh…"

When she had stepped outside for just a moment to wash the dishes, I snuck out of the bedroom and then cried my eyes out. When I had gone out shopping with our mother, I fainted and collapsed in a heap. My family's estimation of me is probably scraping rock bottom, so Tory probably isn't going to let me out of her sight.

“If Daddy doesn’t have this he’ll be in trouble, right?”
“…Maine, are you able to walk all the way to the gates?”

Rather than leaving me alone, it looks like we’re going to go out together. Thinking of the distance between here and the town market makes me a little bit uneasy, but my mother’s wrath is far more terrifying. I clench my fist and put on my bravest face.

“I’ll… I’ll do it!” I say.
“Well, let’s go, then.”

Package in hand, we depart, bundled up in our countless layers of clothing. Although we may be wearing many layers, we are not at all fashionable in the slightest. This is entirely for protection from the cold.

By the way, my selection of clothing includes two pairs of underwear, two woolen one-piece dresses, one knitted woolen sweater, two pairs of knit pants that are kind of like long johns, and two pairs of socks, also knitted out of wool. I am wearing every single piece of it.

“Tory, isn’t this too heavy to move in?” I had asked, while we were bundling up.
“If we don’t wear it all, though, the wind’s going to break in through the patches and seams, you know? You catch cold super easily too, so you definitely have to wear everything.”

There had been no arguing with my mother when she made me do this, but I briefly entertained the notion that maybe I’d be able to push back against Tory. She, however, was adamant that I dress appropriately to keep myself healthy. I surrendered to her strong sense of responsibility and put everything on. Thanks to that, it’s very hard to move right now.

Tory is really fit, so even though she’s bundled up just as tightly as I am, she’s as nimble as she usually is. To make things worse, she’s always going out to collect firewood with the other children and run errands for our mother, so she’s used to walking around a lot. I, on the other hand, am neither strong nor fast. And I’m wearing a ton of clothing.

“Maine, are you alright?” “Haaah… haaah…” I pant, “If we go… a little slower… I’ll be fine.”

Just like last time, I'm out of breath after climbing down all those stairs. I walk at my own pace. If I push it too hard and collapse, I'm just going to burden Tory even more. It's important for me to start building her trust in me back up.

Even so, walking on cobblestones is haaaard…

They're extremely uneven, so if you aren't paying too much attention to where you step, your foot will get caught and you'll fall on your face. I hold onto Tory's hand, letting her do the navigating while I concentrate on putting my feet in the right place.

From a little ways away, a boy's voice rings out. "Oh hey, it's Tory! What are you up to?"

I raise my head. Three boys, wearing wooden backpacks and carrying bows, come running up to us. With red, blond, and pink hair, the trio is certainly eye-catchingly colorful.

Their clothing might have originally been dyed, but years of dirt and food stains have made them a mottled gray. They seem like hand-me-downs, covered in patches. It's not that different than what I'm wearing, so their standard of living is probably the same as ours.

"Ah, Ralph! And Lutz and Fey too!"

Since Tory seems so friendly with these three, it's likely that Maine has some sort of connection to them as well. I scrunch up my forehead in concentration, digging through Maine's memories.

Ah, yep, there it is. Oh, they're the neighborhood kids.

Ralph, same age as Tory. He's redheaded and is the strongest. The leader of the kids, gives off an atmosphere as if he's everyone's big brother.
Fey, also the same age as Tory. Pink-haired, with the kind of mischievous face you'd see on the worst kind of prankster. He and Maine never got very close, maybe because of the differences in their constitution, so she doesn't have very many memories of him.
Lutz, Ralph's younger brother and the same age as me. He tries to act like he's my older brother, but he comes across like a cute little boy that wants to grow up.

The three of them seem to be part of Tory's usual party when she heads off to the forest, and it seems like they sometimes brought Maine along with them. The memories of those few outings seem much clearer than Maine's other memories.

While my focus was turned inward as I dug through my memory, Tory had struck up a lively conversation with Ralph.

"My dad forgot something, so we're going to the gates to bring it to him," she says. "You guys going to the forest?"
"Yeah. Wanna go to the gate together?"
"Sure!"

When I see how her face lights up as she talks to Ralph, I realize how much trouble I'm putting her through every day. Of course heading off to the forest with your friends is way more fun than babysitting, isn't it? I'm sorry for being such a drag of a little sister. Although, my fever *has* been down for a few days, so it should be okay for me to start going out again. Specifically, to go out and find a store that will sell me some paper.

When the other kids had just joined up with us, they'd started going at my speed, but Tory suddenly sped up. Since we're holding hands, I'm pulled along with her. Quickly, my feet get tangled together.

"Whoaaaa!"
"Maine?!" Tory immediately stops moving, so I don't fall flat on my face, but I do scrape my knee. "I'm so sorry! Are you okay?"
"…Yeah."

My knee doesn't hurt very much, but now that I've sat down, standing up seems so hard. I just want to rest a little. As I think about how oppressive this situation is, Lutz offers me his hand.

"…Hey, Maine. Want to ride on my pack?"

Lutz, you're such a good kid!

According to Maine's memories, Ralph and Fey are always acting like they're better than Lutz, so even though he's the same age as Maine, he tries to act like her older

brother, especially because she's so small and weak. Whenever she started getting too exhausted, he'd take her pack so she could keep going. What a gentleman!

On top of that, his blond hair is a color that I'm actually used to seeing, unlike pink or green, which is comforting.

"Maine, are you getting another fever? If it's getting too hard, I can carry you."

Lutz seems so happy. Seriously, he does! However, even though he's bigger than me, we're still the same age, so having him carry me on his back might be kind of bad…

As I worry about what I should do, Ralph sighs a little, then puts down his backpack.

"Lutz," he says, "if you're carrying her, it'll take us forever to get to the forest. I'll carry Maine. Lutz, you take my bow, Fey, you take my backpack."
"Ralph…"

Lutz scowls resentfully at Ralph. He must feel like his good deed was just snatched away from him.

I grab his hand tightly. "You were the first to help me, Lutz," I say, smiling broadly. "You're so kind. Thanks! You made me happy."

Being praised for noticing me seems to be enough for Lutz. He smiles shyly, and takes Ralph's bow without complaint.

If you praise a child for being kind, they'll keep that kindness with them as they grow up. I'm speaking, of course, from my adult perspective.

"Hey, come here," says Ralph, beckoning.
"Okay! Thanks, Ralph," I reply.

Ralph is just a little bit bigger than Tory. I lean my weight against his back. There's no need here for the shyness of a little girl. No need at all. With me riding securely on his back, Ralph starts walking at a steady pace.

My field of view is about thirty to forty centimeters higher than it usually is, and the world looks so different from up here. Or, more precisely, I don't have to keep my eyes on the ground to avoid tripping, so I can actually look around freely. On top of that,

Ralph doesn't have to slow down to match my usual pace, so the scenery is flowing by at a steady rate.

"Whoa, I'm so high!" I exclaim. "So fast, too!"
"Don't get too excited, okay?" he says. "You'll get sick again."
"Yeah! I'll be careful."

Eh heh heh, being a frail little girl has its advantages~! Even better, boys who keep going to the forest to get firewood are pretty strong. He's got way more muscle than you'd expect from a kid.

If I compare these people to my recollection of what Japanese elementary schoolers are like, there is a significant difference in physique. This might not be a fair comparison, though; not only is the lifestyle very different, but these people are of a different race.

Another thing I shouldn't be comparing to Japan is the scenery. Thin streams of filth ooze out from the narrow alleys, and the pack mules that wander up and down the main street are walking through piles of their own shit…

It's… it's not like I've been specifically staring at the filth! This is just the kind of spectacle that you'd never see in Japan, so I was a little surprised, so of course my eyes were drawn to it!

Unlike when I had gone out to the town market, the streets are filled with people going to work, so I can't see into any of the first-floor shops as we go past. The shops that deal only in commodities have glass windows, but from here, all I can see are the signs hung above the doors. To make things worse, all of the buildings along the street are of similar color and design, so my eyes are, of course, drawn to anything that stands out in the slightest. It's not my fault!

"You okay, Ralph?" asks Tory, looking a little concerned. "Maine isn't too heavy?"

Ralph shifts me around slightly with a jolt, securing his grip. He turns his head away a little. "I said it was okay," he says, curtly. "Maine's really tiny, and she's light. If we let her walk, wouldn't it trouble you more?"

I can sympathize with the shy expression on Tory's troubled face, and I want to help her out. Aren't you supposed to be thanking her right now?

…Oh *ho!* Ralph's just a boy! Perhaps he's interested in Tory? He's trying to use me to get into her heart. I don't particularly mind, though. Alright, let's make this puppy love happen!

…Of course, this is just my particular delusion. The both of them are still very young, so they probably aren't able to really feel true love… but I have no books to keep me busy, so at least let me have my fantasies.

Then, Ralph suddenly says "Tory, you smell… nice," acting so smooth as he smells her hair. What the hell, kid, do you think you're the hero of a YA romance novel? Then, of course, Tory blushes shyly and says "Really? Thanks…"

I may not have very many bittersweet experiences under my own belt, even at 22, but Tory is so ridiculously sweet at six years old that it's only natural for me to have these sorts of thoughts, right?

I never used to pay it any mind when people told me that I'd never have any sort of male presence in my life if I just stayed in my dream world, reading my books and lost in my fantasies. It wasn't just my family telling me this; even Shuu from next door kept saying it. None of your business! Idiots. Idiots!

While I was distracted by my irritating memories of Japan, Ralph and Tory's puppy love has blossomed into a proper reverse harem, with Tory in the middle.

"Oh, yeah! It does smell good!"
"What? What?"

Fey and Lutz have also moved in on Tory, smelling her braided hair. They're all about the same age, so this is definitely a reverse harem.

"Whoa, your hair is super glossy!"
"What did you do to it?"

Eh heh heh. That's right, that's right!

Satisfied with the surprised reactions of the reverse harem's members, I nod approvingly from my vantage point on Ralph's back. I've keeping a potpourri of dried flowers in our clothing box, boiling water at dinner time so that Tory and I can give

ourselves sponge baths, washing our hair with herb oils and carefully brushing it out, and, bit by bit, bringing up the level of hygiene in our house.

It looks like my efforts are finally starting to pay off!

Incidentally, Ralph and co. are a little bit on the smelly side. Everything around here stinks, so I've somewhat gotten used to it, but things that stink still stink. Although I'd never say it out loud, from my position on Ralph's back, I can definitely say that he stinks.

I really want to make everyone start washing with soap. The only soap kept at home is a foul-smelling animal-based soap that's used for cleaning and doing laundry. Nobody has any nice-smelling vegetable-based soaps to wash themselves with, which is terrible.

Aaaah, even just hand soap would be nice…

As I spaced out, lost in my own thoughts, Lutz suddenly tugs on my hair, sniffing it like he did to Tory's. "Maine, you smell good too! I can see your face really well with your hair up like that too, you look really cute."

He gazes innocently at me with his pale green eyes.

Not good! Lutz, your color scheme is too good! Blond hair and green eyes, that's the recipe for a really hot dude!

Noooooooo! My opponent is a child, why am I suddenly so shy?! I know he has zero intentions, but the framing of this scene is just too awkward! Please, stop! I should be old enough to know better, but I have no experience with these things! I can't cope!!

I'm the only one here who's trying to keep their heart from doing backflips. Everyone else is already talking about the things they're going to find in the forest or when they think the first snowfall of the season will come. Ignoring how I'm about to faint, Lutz is bragging about how much better he's gotten at shooting his bow lately. Unlike Tory, who's shyly thanking everyone for their help, I can barely say a word. My heart is pounding again.

For five and six year olds to do this stuff so calmly, is this normal?! What's with this world! What's a humble, shy, pure girl to do? Will my heart be stained by evil?

…Don’t you dare ask who I was calling a pure girl!

Chapter 8
Paper: Impossible to acquire

As I cling to Ralph's back, my legs dangling, the gates of the outer wall come into view.

The outer wall was built to protect the town, so it's considerably taller than other buildings nearby. It's about two or three stories tall by Japanese standards, and it's quite thick. It has gates at each of the cardinal directions, at which it seems that several soldiers are stationed in order to check incoming travelers.

The gate ahead is the south gate, and I can see several soldiers standing there. One of them is probably my father. I can't tell which one is him, but it looks like Tory knows. She clutches the bundle close to her chest, and runs forward, waving her arm.

"Father!" she calls.
Our father looks surprised. "Tory, what's the matter?"
"You left something at the house!" says Tory, beaming as she hands over the bundle. "We came to bring it to you."

Tory, you're so kind. You're too kind! If it were me talking to my previous father, I wouldn't have said anything nearly so kind. My true feelings would probably have slipped out, something like "Mom would be pissed if she found out you'd left this at the house, and that would be a huge bother. Did you forget what happened this morning?"

"Ahh, I'm saved!" he says, reaching out to take the bundle with a sigh of relief. "…Hm? Did you leave Maine by herself?!"

Father scowls. It seems that he hadn't noticed anyone except for his beloved daughter Tory, so he had completely ignored Ralph's group and missed me, his other beloved daughter, clinging to Ralph's back. Tory shakes her head vigorously, and points over at Ralph.

"Nuh uh, she came too! Look, she's riding on Ralph's back."
"Huh? Oh! I see." He glances around, feeling a little embarrassed that he hadn't noticed us, then pats Ralph on the head. "Sorry you had to carry her all this way, Ralph."

“We were going to the forest, so it was on our way,” says Ralph, looking a little bothered by how my father is ruffling his hair. He sets me down, then goes to collect the stuff that Fey and Lutz were holding for him.

“Thanks, Ralph,” says my father. “Lutz and Fey, you too.”

We see off Ralph and his friends as they head through the gate on their way to the forest, then Tory and I head to the gate’s waiting room. The wall here is thick enough that you could probably put a three meter by four meter room[1] in it. This room isn’t nearly that large, so it looks like there’s both a waiting room and a room for the night watch in here. The waiting room is very simple, with a table, a few chairs, and a cabinet.

I look around excitedly, feeling like I’m visiting a foreign country for the first time. After a little while, one of my father’s coworkers brings us some water.

“You two are such good kids, bringing your dad something he forgot.”

It took us about twenty minutes, going at Tory’s pace, to get from our home to the gate, so I’m incredibly grateful to finally get some water. I gulp back all of the water in the wooden cup I’ve been given, then let out a huge sigh.

“Ahhh, delicious! I’ve been revived!”
“Maine,” says Tory with a frown, “didn’t you barely walk at all?”

At those words, everyone starts laughing. I try to look upset, but I really can’t object since everyone saw Ralph carrying me in. I help myself to another cup of water as everyone laughs at me.

Another soldier enters the room. He grabs a wooden box, which seems to be some kind of toolbox, from the shelves, then immediately heads back out. Unintentionally, I frown a little at how hectic things seem to be.

“Daddy,” I ask, “Did something happen?”
“It’s probably just someone who needs special attention coming through the gates. Nothing to worry about.”

My father may be waving his hand dismissively while saying not to pay it any mind, but I can't help but worry a little when I see a busy situation like that. Are things really okay?

I mean, this is a gate. The gatekeepers are riled up, you know? Isn't this a danger flag?

In contrast to my worries, Tory is just sitting there, looking like there's no danger at all, with her head tilted to one side. "What kind of person needs special attention?" she asks. "Have I seen them before?"

It looks like Tory can't think of anyone who would rile up the guards like this, even though she travels through this gate fairly often. Our father rubs thoughtfully at the stubble on his chin for a moment before answering.

"Uhhh, perhaps its someone who looks like a bad person who committed a crime. Or, maybe, it's an arriving aristocrat that we need to inform the lord about."
"Oh…"

If he says that someone looks like a criminal, then it seems like they pass judgement just based on how someone looks. Although, if I think about how things work around here, it seems unlikely that they have any real way to transmit information around, so they probably have no choice but to stop and investigate every suspicious-looking individual.

"We'll have them wait in another room while the higher-ups decide if it's okay to let them into the city."

Ahh, so that means that there must be several waiting rooms around the gate. I get it now. Surely, there must be significant differences between the rooms for the nobility and rooms for criminals, from the size of them to the quality of the furniture. Life's unfair, no matter what world you're in.

While I contemplate these things, the young soldier returns, bringing back the wooden box as well as some sort of cylindrical, pipe-like item. There wasn't even a trace of any tension on his face, like you'd expect from an emergency situation. Looks like my father was right, this is no big deal.

The soldier, with cargo in his left hand, walks up to my father, raises his right fist, then thumps the left side of his chest twice. My father stands up, straightens himself, and returns the gesture. This is probably this world's salute.

"Otto, I'll leave the report to you," says my father, with a stern, commanding expression that I've never seen at home.

"Ohh," I murmur, appreciatively. I haven't seen him do anything but laze around, so this is really fresh. His expression is sharp, and he actually looks really cool.

"Count Lowenwalt wishes for the rampart gates to be opened, sir," says Otto.
"His seal?"
"Has been verified, sir."
"Right, he can pass."

Otto salutes once more, then sits down in the chair across from me. He sets the wooden box down on the table next to him, then uses both hands to spread the other thing out. It isn't as smooth as paper, and it has some sort of smell to it, but my eyes snap to it immediately.

Parchment?!

I don't know if it really is parchment, but it definitely is some kind of paper that has properties like it was made out of animal skin. I can't read anything it says, but there are words written there using the alphabet of this world. Before my staring eyes, Otto takes from the box an inkwell and a reed pen, then starts to write something down on the parchment.

Whoooooooooooa!! Writing! There is a person who can write here!! This is the first civilized man I have met in this world. I absolutely want him to teach me how to read this language!

As I think, my gaze is fixed on Otto's hands as if I were going to devour them. My dad places a hand on my head and ruffles my hair. "What is it?" he asks.

I look up at my father, then point at the parchment-looking thing. If I don't figure out what it's called, I won't be able to ask about it in the future. "Daddy, Daddy! What's that?" I ask.
"Ah, that's parchment!" he says. "It's a paper made from the skin of goats or sheep."

“What’s this black stuff?”
“That’s ink, and that’s a pen.”

As I thought! I’ve found paper and ink, so I can make books. I’m so happy that I could start dancing, but I try to stay calm. I clasp my hands tightly in front of me, look endearingly up at my father, and start begging with all my might.

“Hey, Daddy. Can I have that?”
“No, Maine, that’s not a kid’s toy.”

Even though I’d tried to project every last mote of adorable little girl charm, he rejected my pleas immediately. Of course, just because I’ve been shot down, doesn’t mean I’m not going to stop trying.

When it comes to books, I clamp down on them like a snapping turtle and stick to them like gum on a shoe. You really shouldn’t underestimate my adhesion!

“I wanna write like this! I really do. Pleeeease!”
“You just can’t, Maine! You don’t even know how to write.”

Certainly, if you don’t know how to write, then you don’t need any paper or ink. For this very reason, now’s my greatest chance to twist my father’s words back around.

“Ah, I’ll learn if you teach me! If I learn, then can I have that?”

The younger, lower-ranked soldier can write, so it’s likely that my father, who seems to be his superior, can write as well. I never would have thought that someone who knew how to write would live in a house without a single sheet of paper, but I’m happy to have been proven wrong. If my father can teach me how to read and write, then reading the books of this world is no longer an impossible dream.

As I sit there with a huge smile plastered over my face, feeling like I’ve gotten one step closer to realizing my ambitions, someone lets out a muffled snort. I look around, trying to find the source, and see Otto barely holding in his laughter, as if our father-daughter conversations about pen and ink are almost too much to bear.

“Ahahaha, ‘teach me’, she says… heh heh, sir, aren’t you pretty bad at writing?”

With a sharp snap, cracks spiderwebbed throughout my ambition. My smile freezes on my face, like someone's dumped a bucket of ice water all over me.

"Huh? Daddy, can you not write?"
"I can read, more-or-less, and write too. My job involves paperwork, so I need to know how to read, but I've never really needed to know any characters outside of the ones I use at work. Just enough so that I can write down the names of people who come from far away, after I hear them."[2]

"Ohhh…," I sigh, staring at my father with a sullen expression on my face as he makes his excuses. So, it seems that my father's literacy level is such that he's only got a basic grasp of the alphabet to the point where if his class assignment was to write out his friend's names then he could. The young Otto, though, said "pretty bad", so he must be on the level of a first grader, who'd still make some mistakes with his classmate's names. To be frank: worthless.

"Hey now, don't look at your father like that!" says Otto, the person who caused my opinion of my father to drop so dramatically, with a nervouse look on his face as he scolds me. Then, as if he's covering for my father, he starts to explain the duties of a soldier.

"The job of a soldier is to keep the peace in the town, but when there's big events that the nobility put on, the knights usually are the ones who get the written instructions, and for smaller events all of the coordination is done verbally. We don't really see a lot of different characters. Just being able to write people's names is enough."

My father had a chance to pull himself together while Otto was covering for him, and has pulled his pride back together. It seems like my unimpressed stare hurt his feelings unexpectedly much.

"Barely anyone knows how to read amongst the peasantry, except for the village leaders. I'm pretty amazing already, you know!" he says, his chest puffed out.
"Whoa, you really are amazing, Daddy! Can I have this? Pleeeease?"

You're amazing, Daddy, so you want to give your beloved daughter with a hundred sheets of paper as a present, with fanfare. I stare into his eyes as I layer on the extortion, but he wavers a little and retreats a step.

"……One page would make an entire month's wages disappear, so giving it to a kid…"

What did you say?! An entire month's wages?! Wh… how much could parchment *cost*?! This… even though I'm not a child, this is not the kind of thing that you should dangle just out of my reach!

The reason why there's no paper in the house, the reason why there's no bookstores in this town, they're all the same. The price just isn't one that us commoners can afford to pay. No matter how much I beg for paper, my family barely makes enough money to keep us fed. Nobody's going to buy me paper.

I drop my shoulders, a defeated look on my face. Otto pats me gently on the head, trying to cheer me up.

"Paper's not the kind of thing you can find in stores that commoners can enter, anyway. It's the kind of thing that's only used by the nobility and the people they work with, like important merchants and government officials, so it's not something that kids can use anyway. If you want to learn how to write, why not use a slate? How about I give you the one I used to use when I was just learning?"
"Really? That would be great!"

I immediately nod, and graciously make arrangements to get the slate. I've waited so long, and I really want to learn how to write too, so I'm going to figure out how to press Otto into serving as my teacher.

"Thanks, Mr. Otto! Please, could you teach me how to write? I'm counting on you!"

As I pressure Otto with my adorable smile, my father looks back and forth between the two of us with a pitiful expression on his face, but I'm not paying attention.

Being able to practice writing, getting a slate to write on, these things are enough to set my heart soaring, but what I truly want, *books*, require paper. After all, you can't preserve anything on a slate. A slate is something that you write on and erase many times, like a chalkboard. It's great for practicing how to write, but you can't use it as a book.

It hadn't even crossed my mind that paper might be something that just wasn't sold to commoners. Hmm, how can I make any books if I don't have any paper? If I can't just acquire any paper, what should I do? What can I do?

Can’t I just make it myself?

Before I make any books, I’m going to need to start by making my own paper. However, making paper really isn’t all that simple. I don’t think it’s the kind of thing that I can just pass off as a kid playing around.

Grr, the road to books is long!!

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. She describes the possible dimension of the room as “six-tatami”, referring to a standardized room layout that’s 270 cm by 360 cm. A Western audience needs this explained, but reading off those numbers would be oddly specific, so I rounded up to 3 meters by 4 meters.
2. It seems as though the writing system is based off of Japanese (no surprise), which has both a phonetic alphabet, where characters correspond to generic sounds, and a logographic alphabet, where specific characters mean specific things with specific readings. Knowing enough to write someone’s name down means that Maine’s father knows the phonetic alphabet, so he can write things that he hears, but doesn’t know how to “spell” them correctly with the right logograms. (For a more Western example, imagine having to write down Arnold Schwarzenegger’s name having only heard it once. Then imagine that everyone’s names are that hard to spell.)

Chapter 9
Respect for Ancient Egypt

Now then, even though I have my heart absolutely set on making books, I have yet to actually secure a source of paper. My Japanese sensibilities are telling me that I should just go to an office supply store, where they sell five hundred sheets of copy paper for two hundred yen[1], but in the world I live in now, just one page of parchment would make an entire month's worth of my father's salary disappear.

To make that just one page, a hide has to be stripped, all of the fur shaved off, and then from the largest usable part of a single animal's hide, sheets must be cut that are of a size that's easy to work with. The page that I saw at my father's workplace was about the size of an A4 sheet of paper[2]. If I were to cut up a single page of parchment, I wouldn't get more than about five to eight usable pages. To put it plainly, it's so expensive that there's no way a commoner like me could possibly buy enough to write a book.

So, if I'm going to make a book, I need to make some paper.

However, I know nothing about how to actually make paper other than what I've read in books. After all, paper has always been something that I could just go to a store and buy. I could go into any drugstore and find loose-leaf paper and notebooks with the rest of the school supplies. I lived in a world where people would just hand out little notepads on the street as promotional items. Banks gave out free calendars, and my mailbox was stuffed full of unwanted flyers that went straight into the trash.

If I had one of those unwanted flyers now, I'd read every last word on it, and treasure every centimeter of the margin. A world where paper can be obtained so easily is such a luxurious one. Viva, Japan! If I were to be reborn someday, Japan would be nice.

To make things worse, there aren't any machines here for making paper! If I don't have a machine to help me, the entire process is going to have to be done entirely through my own manual labor.

You must be thinking that the solution to my problems is so obvious, now that I've been reborn in an alternate world without machines. I read a lot of books, you're

thinking, so I have a lot of knowledge that I can use, right? …Please, think about it for a little bit.

All I ever wanted to do was read, and I thought that even using electrical appliances to do the daily chores was too much work. You think that such a worthless Japanese woman could suddenly start doing all the manual labor required to make paper by hand? On top of that, my current body is a child, with a weak constitution, who simply can't do some things, isn't allowed to do others, and is otherwise extremely restricted in action.

In conclusion: there's no way in hell.

However, it's too early to give up. Throughout the world's history, businesses and governments have needed to keep records. This goes back to ancient times, but machine-made paper certainly isn't that old. In other words, I might be able to take the ancient methods used in ancient times and reproduce them here and now.

Hmmm, what did they do before they had machines?

I scrunch up my eyebrows and open my tiny five-year-old's hands (more like three-year-old's because of my tiny physique) as far as they can go, concentrating hard.

Ancient civilizations, ancient civilizations… If you're talking about ancient civilizations, Ancient Egypt is first on the list! And, if you're talking about Ancient Egypt, you have to talk about papyrus! Three cheers for Ancient Egypt!

Thanks to that word-association game, I've hit upon the idea of making Papyrus like the Ancient Egyptians did. If it's something they invented in ancient history, I should be able to do it myself, somehow, even with my tiny hands.

I think that they made it out of some kind of plant, like a straight tree or tall grass… probably. Here, there are plenty of plants. I'm positive that I could find plants suitable for making paper scattered around the forest.

Yeah, the forest. Let's go to the forest.

Whenever it came to books, I'd always happily do whatever impossible legwork I needed to do. My family, and even little Shu always looked on with wonder, then

sighed in lament. So, now that I've got this idea, I want to implement it immediately. I try begging Tory to take me with her to the forest.

"Tory, I wanna go to the forest too! Can I go w—"
"Eh?! You?! No way!"

She shot me down before I even had a chance to finish talking. She reacted so fast that it was obvious she hadn't even had to think twice. On top of that, she said "no way", not "you shouldn't", which implied that there wasn't any room for me to change her mind, which really hurt.

"Why not?"
"You couldn't make it there, you know?" she says, then starts counting the reasons off on her fingers. "If you can't make it to the gates, you absolutely can't make it all the way to the forest. And when we go to the forest, we're going to gather firewood, fruits, and nuts, right? You really can't take it easy out there. Also, can you even climb a tree? And when we're coming back, would you be able to carry a big, heavy box on your back while you walk? If we wanted to make it back before the gates closed for the day, we wouldn't be able to take any breaks on the way back. There's no way you can do it, see?"

The list is a little long, but it essentially all boils down to "you're not strong enough".

"Also," she says, "it's almost winter, so there aren't really many things we can find in the forest right now…"

Even if I were to make it, there isn't really anything to harvest, she's saying.

This is really tough. Do I go to the forest even though there might not be anything to harvest, or do I give up on making paper? This decision is way too tough.

Tory notices the deep look of worry on my face. "What do you want to get?" she asks, tilting her head to one side. "There's not going to be many melia fruits left, you know."

Melia fruits are what I've been making our simple shampoo out of. We haven't been eating the fruits Tory brings back; instead, we've been extracting all of the oil from them and storing it. Then, occasionally, we use it as a moisturizer for our hair.

I'd be happy to get more melia, but the important thing here is not beauty, it's books. I need plant fibers to use as raw materials for my pseudo-papyrus.

"Ummm… are there any *'plants whose fibers can be easily extracted'*?"
"Eh? What?"

Tory has a dubious look on her face, so I repeat myself. That's definitely the face of someone who did not understand my Japanese. I think for a moment, then try to explain it again using very easy-to-understand words.

"…I need grass with a straight, fat stalk. I just want the stalk."

"Hmmm…" Tory ponders my question. Does she have some kind of idea? I watch her intently as I wait for a reply. After a little while, she shrugs her shoulders with a resigned look on her face.

"Sure, I'll try asking Ralph and Lutz for help."
"Huh?" She didn't say she was going to do it for me, but she said she'd try?

I don't quite understand what she's getting at, and I tilt my head to one side. Tory seems a little surprised by my reaction. I blink a few times, my head tilted confusedly, as if to ask her what she said just now.

"Ralph's family raises chickens, you know? They need a lot of feed to make it through the winter."

Uh, even if you say "you know," I didn't actually know that. Tory's saying these things as if they're blatantly obvious, though, so I keep my actual reaction hidden. "Oh yeah!" I say.

"So, I'll offer to help them gather grass, then I'll try asking them for some stalks. The seasons where we get a lot of grass are over now, so there might not be that much, okay?"
"That's okay! Thanks, Tory!"

Really, Tory, you're an amazing older sister.

The next day, I accompany Tory downstairs as she leaves to go to the forest, and ask Ralph and Lutz if they'll help me. They agree to do it, and I breathe a small sigh of relief. However, there's no way I'm going to rely solely on them.

I'm going to go and gather some grass myself. Fortunately, grass grows around the well in the places the paving stones don't cover. I don't know if the stalks can be used, though.

"Mommy, I want to go down to the well with you."
"Oh! Do you want to help out?"
"Nuh-uh. Something else." It might be kind of rude, but if I spend all my time helping out, I won't be able to gather any grass. "I wanna gather grass." I show her the little basket Tory made earlier.
"Ah, do your best."

I may have refused to help out, but she's still letting me accompany her down, whether it's because she doesn't want to get in the way of my enthusiasm or because she's happy that I have enough strength to move around like this.

Once again, I go down the stairs, following my mother as she carries the laundry down. This is my second trip today, so just going down the stairs made me so winded that there's no way I can gather any grass.

I rest next to my mother as she draws water from the well, then uses a foul-smelling, not-foamy, animal-based detergent to start scrubbing away at the laundry.

"Ohh! If it isn't little Maine!" calls out a woman, who I don't recognize, in a friendly voice.
"Good morning," I say politely.
"Ah, Carla!" says my mother, with a smile. "Morning. You're up early today."

From my mother's reaction, it would seem that I'm misremembering. This must be an acquaintance of Maine's. I try to keep my lack of recognition off of my face while I dig through my memories a little.

I really do know this person. According to my memory, this is Ralph and Lutz's mother. She's got a fairly strong build and, hmmmm, actually seems like a very reliable person.

So, should I something like, “thanks for all your help”? Wait, no, no, that is absolutely not what a five-year-old would say. What does a little kid say to an older woman that she’s on really good terms with? Someone, help!

Carla looks over at me as I’m caught up in spinning thoughts around my head, then goes to draw water from the well. She hauls the bucket up effortlessly, then starts washing her own laundry as well. Of course, she’s using the foul animal-based soap.

“How are you doing today, Maine?” she asks. “It’s rare to see you outside.”
“I’m picking some grass! Ralph and Lutz said that they’re gathering it for the chickens.”
“Aww, for us? You shouldn’t have,” she says, in a tone of voice that seems to imply that it’s no big deal either way as she continues to pound away at her laundry.

She, along with my mother, is having a lively conversation about this and that with the other mothers that have gathered around the well. Incidentally, it’s amazing how all of these mothers are talking so much while continuing to work so diligently.

Nevertheless, this soap really stinks. If you tried using some herbs to help erase the smell, wouldn’t it be nicer? Or maybe would the two smells multiply and turn into an unbearable stench?

Reminded of my plans for improvement, I stand up and start tearing grass from the ground. I try to look for plants with thick, straight stalks that I can use, but I can’t actually tear those out with my own strength.

Doing this with my bare hands is impossible. Someone, get me a sickle, please…

Of course, no sickle arrives, and there’s no way I can get any of this with just my bare hands. Well, whatever. I’m going to just rely on Tory, Ralph, and Lutz, who went to the forest to help feed the chickens.

I’ve given up on finding grass that I can use, so I start pulling up the little sprouts or weaker leaves that the chickens might be able to eat. Even I can pull these out with no problem.

“Maine, it’s time to go!” calls my mother, holding her tub full of tightly wrung-out clothes. It seems like she’s done with the laundry already. I’ve barely filled my little basked halfway, but my mother has to go to work today, and there’s no way I’m going to get scolded for being selfish. I pick up my basket, and start walking back home.

“Are you all set?” she asks. “Right, let’s go.”
“Okay!”

When I first became Maine, I had a fever and my mother was taking time off from work to take care of me, so I didn’t know anything but how life inside my own home was like. Now that I’m healthy again, it seems that I’m going to be left in the care of my elderly neighbor, who’s agreed to babysit me.

If she hadn’t, Tory wouldn’t be able to go to the forest. Got it.

“Mommy’s got to go to work now, Maine. Be a good girl and keep quiet, okay?”
“Okay!”
“I’ll leave her to you, Gerda.”
“Right, right,” she says. “Come, Maine.”

Gerda’s place is full of other children, being watched over just like me. All of these kids are basically infants, who could only really escape by toddling away. In this town, when you’re about three years old, you’re strong enough to start going with your older brothers and sisters to the forest and helping out with the chores. In short, it seems like my family thinks that I’m as weak as a toddler, and can’t stay at home by myself.

What the heck?!

As I fume about my family’s shocking evaluation of my own worth, I see a boy pick up a toy that had fallen on the ground and move to stick it in his mouth. Next to him, a tiny little girl suddenly started crying and hitting him.

“Whoa, gross!” I exclaim. “Don’t put that in your mouth!”
“Oh my,” says the old lady.
“Don’t just start hitting him,” I say to the little girl. “What’s going on?”
“Now, now,” says the old lady.

I’m supposed to be just another kid getting baby-sat, but as the biggest kid around I’ve started watching out for the other kids.

“Oh my,” “now, now,” what the heck! Gerda, old lady, do your job!

While I help Gerda put the littlest kids to sleep, I start thinking about how I'm going to turn the grass stalks I'm going to get into papyrus.

Honestly, I don't really remember how papyrus was made. I never actually had to know.

Certainly, I remember seeing papyrus. It was remarkably thick, with fibers running horizontally and vertically. The fibers on the back were different from the ones on the front and only one side was writable, and there was a note to the side instructing us not to bend it… but there wasn't anything written there about how it was made.

Even more troubling, I can't remember what the photo I saw of it getting made even looked like. I have a hunch about how I might make the fibers all run in the right direction, but how do I bond them together? Is it like rice paper? Do I need some kind of glue or binding agent?

As I think back on how those historical documents neglected to mention these important details, my head tilts to one side. For now, I think I'll try taking a part of the fibers from the hardest stems, then weaving them horizontally and vertically as tightly as I can. With this, I think I won't need any sort of binding agent. That parchment seemed kind of cloth-like, and this is still my first time making pseudo-papyrus, so if I'll be satisfied if I can just get a page i can write on.

"Maine, someone's here for you," says Gerda.
"Toooryyyy~!"

It's evening time, so Tory and the others have come back from the forest to pick me up. I'm so relieved. I was so glad to hear that someone came for me. That emotion sweeps over me, and I cling tightly to Tory.

Old lady Gerda's babysitting did not involve looking after anyone. If something wasn't very dangerous, she'd just leave it be. If someone peed somewhere, she'd wipe it up with a wet cloth and do nothing else. The room reeked of filth. Since I've got the common knowledge of Japan stuck in my head, it's obvious that this day-care is truly terrible. Leaving your kids with a baby-sitter like that is truly terrible.

Really, I want to do something about it, but the problem's too big for my tiny hands. I can't do any of the things I'm thinking of with my own hands, and I also don't know if Gerda's methods are common or not around here. If I start complaining, they might

think that I'm the crazy one. I really wanted to run away from that deplorable environment as fast as I could. I waited in agony, wishing that someone would hurry up and come get me.

"What's wrong, Maine?" asks Tory, patting me on the head. "Did you get lonely after staying there for so long?"
"When you get a little bit stronger, you can totally start coming with us to the forest," says Ralph. "It would be great if you could come with us in the spring!" says Lutz.

I suddenly realize that I absolutely must get stronger. Every single one of my problems has been because I'm too weak.

"Oh, right!" says Ralph. "Here's the grass stalks we promised you." He reaches into his basket and grabs a fistful of grass to show me. In an instant, my worries about the old lady Gerda are blasted out of my head. The important thing here is not old ladies, it's books. It's paper.

"Oh, so much! I'm so happy! Hey, while I was down at the well, I helped get you some grass too!"

I stand tall and proud as I deliver this information, but for some reason the three of them just pat my head. To make things worse, Lutz looks down at me with a warm smile, like he's praising me for having tried my hardest.

Hey, how much does everyone think that I'm a child that can't do anything useful? …I mean, I guess I can't actually do real work, though.

I exchange the grass I'd collected in the little basket that Tory made for the grass that the three of them had collected for me.

Now then, with this, it's time to make some pseudo-papyrus.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. 200 yen is roughly two US dollars.
2. For American audiences: A4 paper is analogous to 8.5" x 11".

Chapter 10
Preparing for Winter

I had originally planned to start working on turning the grass stalks that the other kids had gathered for me into my pseudo-papyrus, but it seems like fate had other plans for me.

"Maine," says my mother, grabbing me by the scruff of my neck as I try to slip out the door.
"Eep?!" I squeak, startled.
"Where do you think you're going? I told you, today we have to start preparing for the winter, right?"

I was trying to go down to the well so that I could start working on extracting the plant fibers from these stalks.

Soon, we'll all be stuck indoors as the long winter creeps in, so we'll have to make preparations in advance. Why, though, am I being pressed into service? I'm so weak that I'm not good for anything! According to Maine's memories, all she ever did was catch a cold, then spend all that time uselessly wandering around. In other words, I'm completely useless. (I'm hoping I don't actually catch a cold, though.)

"You'll go help your father, Maine. Come," she says.
"Doesn't Daddy have work?"
"It's his turn to take a few days off. It wouldn't be good if the soldiers couldn't prepare for winter, you know?"

…Giving employees time off to go prepare for winter is an unexpectedly reasonable thing for an employer to do. On top of that, is preparing for the winter really so hard that it requires a man's help?

Regardless, even if my father is home, it's unusual for me to be paired up with him. He's a muscle-headed soldier, after all, so it's usually the much more fit and energetic Tory that winds up going with him.

Since the entire family's home, I don't think I'll be able to escape. And, since it seems like my father's specifically nominated me, I've got no choice but to follow him.

"…So what are we going to do?" I ask.

Next to the kitchen window, my father is pulling out some things that look like tools.

"We're going to go through the house and do a little maintenance on anything that needs it. The door's what's going to protect us from a big snowstorm, so we need to make sure the hinges are tight, there's no rust, and there aren't any holes in the wood. When we're done with that, we're going to clean out the chimney and the flue for the stove. We don't want to have any problems with those during the winter."
"Huhhh…"

I understand what needs to be done, but how the hell am I supposed to help with any of that? I can barely hold a screwdriver, much less turn it. I can't carry anything heavy, either! You can see these skinny little arms right?!

However, if I'm enthusiastic about doing whatever little bit I can to help out, it'll go a long way to helping build up my family's confidence in me. I can definitely help identify the loose parts on the hinges, and my modern-age knowledge will make spotting rust a piece of cake.

"Daddy, on this hinge, isn't this nail getting rusty?" I say, pointing at a nail.
My father bends down to study it. "…Looks like it'll hold for now."

Uh, wait, no matter how you look at it, a worn-out nail like this is going to rust away, right?

I'm immediately worried by how confidently my father said that. Once winter hits, this door's our main defense against a snowstorm, so it breaking down halfway through would be very bad for us. I climb up on a chair so I can reach the door, and try to rattle it back and forth. No matter how confident my father may be, if I'm able to break it like this, then surely he'd recognize my superior judgement.

After I wiggle the door a few times, the top hinge pops off with a sharp ping, and the door starts to precariously sway on its one remaining hinge. I nod in satisfaction, but my father's face goes ghastly white as he sees the door wobble.

"M- Maine?!"

“Looook, it broke!” I say, pointing at the door. “It wasn’t going to last the winter. Make sure you fix it, Daddy!”

My father, pretending to ignore his judgement error, helps me down off the chair. “Maybe you should go help your mother now.”

Perhaps he’s upset that his daughter pointed out his mistake? I shrug my shoulders, shaking my head. It can’t be helped, I’m not going anywhere. My mother specifically assigned me to help my father, so I’m going to stay next to him and continue my inspections. I’m going to make sure that we make it safely and comfortably through the winter.

“Huh?” I say. “I’ve got to make sure you’ve found everything! We’re fixing things so they don’t break in the winter, so we shouldn’t leave things all beat up like that.”
“We can’t afford to fix everything, and I can’t have you around breaking everything you can. Go see your mother.”

…Money problems, again!

I thought I’d be able to make my father take things a little more seriously by breaking the hinge. Instead, I’m having to quietly make my way to the bedroom to go help Tory and my mother.

The two of them are hanging shirts and blankets from clotheslines, as if they were trying to dry them, and rearranging the beds to be closer to the kitchen stove, trying to make the place just a little bit warmer.

“What’s wrong, Maine?”
“Daddy said that I should come help you instead, Mommy.”
“Oh? Well, we’re almost done with this, so next we’re going to work on getting some more light in here. We should have some beeswax this year. We’ve also got some tallow and some tree nuts, so we’ll spend some time squeezing some oil for the lamp and making a few candles.”

Just hearing about the work makes me wrinkle my nose. I’ve been smelling the stench of animal fats coming from various other houses lately, but the thought of filling our own kitchen with that stink makes me feel really uneasy.

Tory heads off to the storage room to start pressing oil out of the nuts. I, however, don't have enough strength to swing a hammer, so I can't seek shelter in the storage room with her.

Next to my mother, our largest saucepan sits over the fire, filled with nothing but beef tallow.

It *stinks*!! Hang in there, me…

I might be able to bear this stench for now, but it looks like the total extent of my mother's preparation is only just melting the tallow alone and skimming off the impurities that rise to the top.

"Wait, Mommy, is that really all you're doing? You're not going to *'salt it out'*?"
"Hmm? What was that?"

Oh, crap. "Salting out" is so extremely obvious, but it looks like she doesn't know about it.

I try not to flinch as my mother's stare drills into me, as if she's asking me if I *really* have a problem. As best as I can, I try to explain the process using only simple words.

"It's, um… where you add salt water, then you cook it over the fire a little more, and then you strain out the dirt multiple times?"
"Salt water?" she asks.
"Yeah. When you leave it alone and it cools down, only the fat on top will harden, and the water on the bottom will stay liquid, you know? Then, you can take out the water, and only use the fat that was on top. It's more work, but it will smell a lot better, and it'll be a higher quality fat, too."

I don't know if it's because I said "higher quality" or not, but my mother starts salting out the tallow. The quality of the candles that we're going to be burning throughout the entire winter is literally a life-or-death matter for me. We're going to be trapped indoors with it, after all. Living in a house filled with that kind of stench for the whole winter would be far too much for me to bear.

I don't actually know the right concentration of salt we should be using, but even just a little should make things better, right?

I guessed on the concentration, but as we salted out the tallow, it gradually started turning from a dirty yellow to a pure white. We'll be able to use this to make candles, and then when spring comes around and we need to make soap, we can melt the candles again and re-use the tallow.

Not one to waste anything, my mother uses the chunks of meat and bone that we filtered out of the tallow to make a delicious soup stock, which we have for lunch. After that, we start making the candles.

"Now then," says my mother. "Tory, please work on the candles. Your father and I will go and start working on the firewood."
"Okaay!" says Tory, cheerfully.

…Uh, what am I supposed to do, then?

The three of them stand up and get to work. I think about it for a little while, then decide to follow along behind my mother, who's about to step out the front door. I guess I'm going to continue trying to help her out. She notices me, however, and points firmly back towards the kitchen table.

"Maine, go help Tory with the candles. Try not to get in the way."
"…Fine."

Why do you have so little trust in me?

I turn back to the kitchen, where Tory is cutting string into lots of equal lengths to use as wicks. She ties them to wooden sticks, letting them dangle. She takes each stick and starts to dip the strings into and out of the pot of tallow, one by one. As she dips them over and over, tallow starts to soak into and harden around each string, gradually building in circumference with each repetition. Slowly, candles start to take shape.

"Huh, so is that how you make candles…" I muse.
"Maine, don't just watch, help me!" says Tory, scowling.

Tory's starting to get mad, so I decide to help out. I chop up some herbs to erase the scent, then take some candles from the pile so that I can start rolling them in the herbs. They'll have some effect when they're stuck to the outside of the candle, but next year, I'm going to make sure that these herbs get mixed in to the tallow as it melts.

“Maine! Don’t play around!” says Tory.
“…I’m only going to use these ones. It’s better to have candles that aren’t smelly, right? Please, Tory!”
“Okay, fine, but only those ones!”

I nod vigorously to show that Tory’s made herself clear.

I don’t know if this will work or not, so I wasn’t planning on doing this to every candle anyway. I get the herbs attached to five of the candles, varying the amount and positioning so that I can try to figure out what will produce the best result.

While Tory and I keep working like that on the candles, our parents work on preparing enough firewood. There’s so much careful preparation that goes into preparing for the winter, but it’s necessary if we don’t want to freeze to death. To supplement the kindling that Tory brought back, my father’s brought back a huge number of logs, each half a meter long, that he went out and purchased. He’s currently splitting them into firewood, his hatchet beating out a steady rhythm as he works. My mother collects the wood as it splits apart, then carries it to another room to stack it up for later.

“Mommy, where are you taking that?” I ask, startled, as she opens a door to a room I’d never seen before. This is the first time I’ve noticed it, but attached to the storage room is what seems to be an additional storage room. It looks like it might not be used for anything but storing materials that were prepared for the winter. Already, the room is half-filled with chopped wood.

“Huh?” I ask, following her in. “What’s this room for?”
“It’s… the winter storage room, you know?” she says. “Maine, why are you asking about this now?”

Come to think of it, I had been wondering where the heck all of the firewood that Tory had brought back was being stored, but it looks like it’s being kept in here. We typically keep the firewood we use on a day-to-day basis in the storage room, so I guess I just never noticed the other room.

“…It’s cold.”
“Well, this is the farthest place in the house from the stove, after all.”

Our house doesn't have a dedicated living room with a beautiful fireplace, so the kitchen stove is the only real source of heat in the entire house. We spend most of every day in the kitchen, as a result.

Also, since the bedroom is separated from the kitchen (and the stove) by a wall, we've pushed all of the beds in the room up against the closest wall. While the stove burns, the heat radiates through the wall, so when it's time for the children to go to bed the beds are quite warm. They're only warm right when we go to bed, however. Our mother quenches the fire before she goes to bed, so the room is piercingly cold by the time we wake up.

This winter storage room, however, is the furthest room away from the stove, so it's very cold in here. During the winter, this room looks like it would be great for storing food, preserves, and maybe even oil for a while, kind of like a natural refrigerator.

"Wow, we have a lot of wood," I say, amazed.
"We might just barely have enough, don't you think?"

Even though the room's half-full?!

Looking at the pile of firewood before me, I suddenly start thinking about the problem of deforestation. If a single house burns this much firewood over the course of the winter, how much wood does this entire city go through in a single year?

"Maine, don't space out," says my mother. "Make sure you're ready for your handiwork."

I'm not spacing out!! Deforestation is a serious problem that merits significant thought!

Even as I try to object, my mother's already heading back out towards the kitchen. I hurry after her. I really don't want to be in that gloomy, window-less room by myself.

"Mommy, what's handiwork?"
"Hmm… well, the men might do things like repairing the tools they use for their jobs, or maybe use the time to make furniture. We need to make sure we have enough materials ready for that."
"Oh, it's the jobs we do during the winter?"

As I'm asking my questions, my mother is counting out how many balls of yarn she has. "That's right. As for women, making clothes is our most important job, you know? If we don't spin enough thread for weaving cloth or sewing, and if we don't dye things in advance, we won't be able to make anything. My job is dyeing thread, so I already have enough of that for now, but I'll need to spend some time preparing some plants, like nilen, to spin into more thread next year."
"Ohh…"
"On top of that, your sister's baptism is next summer! We're going to need brand new clothing for that, since it's a special day… Hm, and I'm going to need to make that this winter, while I have time…"

My mother's face goes fierce as she concentrates, calculating whether or not she'll have enough materials for the task. I don't want to interrupt her at all, so I quietly migrate downstairs to the well, where Tory is working.

"Tory, what are you doing for your handiwork?"
"I'm making baskets! I'll sell them in the spring."

Tory's already started preparing the materials she'll need for her work. She's brought down a bundle of sticks that she'd gathered in the forest, soaked them, and peeled the bark off. Now, it looks like she's using a knife to shave them down, parallel to the grain.

"Maine, what will you do?" she asks.
"Me? I'm going to make some *'pseudo-papyrus'*."
"What's that?"
"Eheheh, it's a seeeecret!"

Following Tory's example in getting a head start on my winter's work, I'll start separating the fibers I'll need to make my pseudo-papyrus. This is an extremely important part of my preparation! This is a necessary task that nobody could possibly get mad at me about.

To extract the fibers, I can probably do something similar to what Tory's doing. I'll strip the skin off of the grass stalks, soak them in water, and then dry them. Since there's not very much time left to finish our preparations, I wasn't able to get a whole lot of grass. Now, though, I can finally start working on separating out these plant fibers.

"Hey, Tory," I say, "can I get some water?"

"…Sure."
"Hey, Tory," I say, "how do you think I should take just the fibers out of this?"
"Huh? Ummmm…"
"Hey, Tory," I say, "these won't fly away if I dry them like this, right?"
"……"

I bundle up the plant fibers that I've managed to extract. There aren't a whole lot of them, but for the purposes of my experiments I should be able to make maybe one or two pages with this amount.

And, so, I conclude my final preparations for the coming winter. Whoof, man, I worked hard!

Huh? Why's Tory looking so exasperated?

Chapter 11
Slate: Acquired!

May contain disturbing content, see note 1 for details.

The most important part of preparing for the winter is stockpiling food. Unlike Japan, there aren't any supermarkets around here that stay open all year round. The winter weather closes down the town markets, and there aren't very many vegetables that can really be gathered outside. So, if you don't want to starve to death, procuring enough food in advance is indispensable.

And, so, here I am, sitting in a beat-up second-hand wagon amidst a huge pile of boxes. I was rudely awakened this morning, in pitch-blackness, long before the dawn had even begun to break.

"Now, then," my father cheerfully boomed, "today we're going to the farming village! Is everyone ready?"

There's no excuse for doing that.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, wondering what on Earth he's talking about. I scowled at him, but both my mother and Tory are beaming happily. What do I do? All I can do is follow along with the conversation.

"Come to think of it, Maine," said my mother, clapping her hands together, "you were out sick while we were talking about this earlier, so you might not have heard."

My father and Tory nodded in consent. Once again, I'd been left out of a family discussion. I wasn't the slightest bit amused. I tried to glare sullenly at them, but they'd already started quickly moving around as they got ready to leave.

"Anyhow, make sure you dress very warmly, Maine!" she said as she gathered boxes. "You got really sick last year!"

There's no way they were going to leave me to take care of myself all day, so I had no choice but to quietly follow along as she clattered her way downstairs.

…Nevertheless, why are we going to a farming village, anyway?

I had hoped to walk on my own power in order to work on building up some more strength, but my father, frustrated by how slow I was, picked me up and put me in the cart. Now, I'm riding amidst a variety of barrels, empty bottles, piles of cloth, bundles of cord, bags of salt, and all of the other things it seems like we need in order to go visit a farming village.

…Hmm? Perhaps, since I'm in this cart, I'm the most useless piece of luggage on this trip?

I don't have a whole lot of space up here, so I make myself as small as I can and settle down. Up front, my father is yoked to the cart, pulling it forward while my mother and Tory push it from behind. It's becoming really obvious that I'm just extra weight on this trip, which is a little bit depressing.

"Hey, Mommy," I say, "Why're we going to a village?"
"There's not many places where we can go in the city to smoke our meat, you know?" she says. "So, we're going to the nearest village and borrowing one of their smoke huts."
"Smoking meat? Oh yeah, we did go buy a lot of meat the other day."

We already salted it, brined it, and did all sorts of other things to preserve that meat, but there's still more stuff to do? Is this process maybe a little too painful? Is the meat still okay?

As I count off the days since we bought the meat on my fingers, I grow more and more anxious. My mother looks over at me, shocked.

"What are you talking about? Today's pig-slaughtering day, you know. We're going to buy two pigs, then help everyone out to spread out the work, and then we'll all share the results."
"Uh?"

My ears instantly reject my mother's words. In the fraction of a second it takes the sounds to reach my brain, a chill starts running down my spine.

"P… P-p-p… pig-slaughtering day?!"

“It’s a day where we go meet up with our neighbors, slaughter and butcher a few pigs, salt and smoke the meat, and make things like bacon, pot roasts, and sausage. Maine… oh, right, last year you stayed in the cart because you were so feverish.”

If at *all* possible, I would like to get a fever this year too. If I can do that, then at the very least I might be able to shield my eyes from that grim display.

“Mommy, didn’t we buy a ton of meat at the market the other day…?”
“There’s no way that much meat would last the entire winter, you know? We bought that to supplement the meat we’re going to get from slaughtering pigs today, since you know that won’t be enough by itself either, right?”

I thought we had bought a huge amount of meat, but I hadn’t even considered the possibility that what we bought was just to supplement our stocks. I have no idea whatsoever as to how much meat is truly required when preparing for the winter.

It looks like can’t save myself from being dragged to pig-slaughtering day, so a wave of depression sweeps through my heart. In contrast, Tory is wearing her biggest smile while she pushes the cart onward.

“This is going to be fun!” she says. “We’re going to get to help out, and then we’ll get to eat freshly-made sausage. This is your first time helping, but when you get caught up in the noise and excitement everyone’s making, it feels kinda like a mini festival! I’m excited that you’re helping out this year!”
“‘Everyone’?” I ask, tilting my head to the side in confusion.
My mother shoots me a look, as if asking me why I’m asking such obvious questions. “The rest of the neighbors, right? Slaughtering a pig is a big task, so it’s not really easy to do it with less than ten adults, you know?”

Whoa, the neighbors, huh…

There’s a lot of spots in Maine’s memories that are really fuzzy, so there’s no doubt that there will be a lot of people there who will know me even though I have no idea who they are. Far more troublesome, however, is what we’ve come to do today: slaughtering and butchering a pig. Just remembering the grisly spectacle at the market the other day sends chills down my spine.

“…I don’t wanna go,” I say.

“What are you saying?” asks my mother. “If we don’t go, we’re not going to have any sausage or bacon for the winter, you know?”

It seems like I’m not allowed to complain, since we don’t have enough food for the winter otherwise. If we don’t go, we’ll starve, so no matter how much I complain, I’ll still be forced to cooperate.

As my mood grows gloomier and gloomier, our cart reaches the southern gate of the city walls.

“Good morning,” says a soldier, one of my father’s subordinates, standing guard at the gate. “Oh? Sir, are you running late? Everyone else already left the gates a long time ago.”
“Yeah, I know…”

Somehow, it seems like our neighbors have are already long gone.

“Have a good day, sir.”

The young-looking guard smiles and waves at me as we go past, and I make myself wave back. Being friendly is important.

This is my first time leaving the city since becoming Maine, so when the cart rumbles out of the short tunnel the gate is set into, I let out an astonished gasp. To be honest, I hadn’t even thought that the environments inside and outside the city walls could be so different.

“Whoa…”

First of all, there aren’t any houses. The streets within the city are always so crowded and claustrophobic, but this road widens into a broad highway as it leaves the gates. Off in the distance, I can see a village, with about ten to fifteen buildings that just look like dots on the horizon.

Also, the air is fantastic. As we leave, the accumulated stench of human filth dissipates into nothingness, leaving only sweet, clean air in its place. There are no walls here to trap in foul air.

Everywhere I look is green, from the light green of the rolling fields before me to the deep green of the tall, tall trees of the forest in the distance. Everything is extraordinarily tranquil.

“Maine, close your mouth before you bite off your tongue,” warns my father.
“Eh?!”

Immediately after my father gives his warning, the cart lurches hard to the side, then starts to bounce and jostle even worse than it was doing so before. We’ve left the cobblestone roads of the city behind us, and the road ahead is packed, unpaved dirt. The luggage shakes around as if it might pop out of the cart, but, luckily, the ropes tied around it keep it in place. I, however, have no such security.

On a sunny day, you’d have to clatter over hard, uneven packed clay. On a rainy day, you’d have to slog through mushy, soggy mud. These roads are the worst! Pour some asphalt!

Unable to escape through my tightly-closed mouth, my objections bounce around in my head wildly. I cling, desperately, to the side of the cart, trying my hardest not to fall out.

“We’re almost there,” says my father.

Fifteen minutes after we left the city gates, we’ve arrived at the entrance to the farming village. The village is bustling, with countless people moving about.

Butchering pigs is primarily a man’s work. Holding down a hundred-kilogram pig, trussing it up, and hoisting it all requires a good deal of strength. Meanwhile, the women handle setting up the smoking huts, getting huge amounts of water ready for boiling, making sure all of the tools and salt are ready, and doing other general prep work.

It looks like the slaughter had actually started just before we finally arrived. Of course, if you’re not there to help, you don’t get any meat.

“Oh no,” exclaims my father, “they’ve already started!”
“That’s not good!” says my mother. “Tory, hurry!”

“Yeah!”

The three of them let go of the cart, then pull out aprons made from some sort of thick, heavy material that looks like it’s been heavily covered with wax. My mother and Tory run towards the smoking huts, where quite a few women have already gathered, putting on their aprons as they ran. My father ties his apron on securely, grabs the spear he uses for work out of the back of the wagon, then dashes towards the town square.

That was fast!!

In the blink of an eye, my family abandoned me before I had any time to react. I might still be able to run after my mother, but I have no idea what I’d be supposed to do in such a huge crowd, so it’s only natural that I’m apprehensive about that idea. Since this is a yearly event, it looks like everyone already knows what they need to do from common knowledge. Give me the instruction manual, please…

Since I’d just get in the way if I tried to help, I’ll stay here and watch over the cart until someone calls for me. I sit down amongst the rest of the abandoned luggage, staring off into space, convincing myself that what I’m doing is an important task.

However, the spot where my father chose to leave his luggage is in full view of the village square, where they’re doing the slaughtering. There’s a little bit of distance between me and the square, but I can clearly hear the agonized squeals of one of the pigs and plainly see as it frantically tries to escape.

A rope has been tied to a wooden stake set firmly in the ground. The other end of the rope has already been tied around the pig’s right hindleg. The men chase it around and around the stake, desperately trying to catch and hold it down. I see a flash of familiar pink hair amongst the crowd; Ralph and Lutz are undoubtedly in there.

“Here I come!” yells my father, charging onto the battlefield with spear at the ready. He sets his spear, then with a mighty shout, pierces into the pig with a single, strong thrust. The pig collapses to the ground from that one strike, convulsing in its death throes before finally falling still.

I squeak in horror as all the blood drains from my face, but the people in the plaza start cheering for my father. My mother runs out, carrying a metal container, kind of

like a bucket, on a somewhat lengthy wooden pole. Another woman follows, bringing with her some kind of large bowl.

I have no idea what they're about to do, so I lean forward to get a better look. In the next instant, blood suddenly flies out, and some people's aprons are stained bright, dripping red. Preparations for catching the blood had just been finished, it seems, so my father had yanked out the spear and caused blood to start spurting from the wound. Reflexively, I clamp my hand over my mouth and fall back into the wagon.

The pig is concealed from view behind the skirt of the woman with the bowl, but I can see how she collects the massive amounts of blood in her bowl, transferring it to the bucket whenever it gets full. This seems to be her everyday job, from the way she moves. My mother, on the other hand, has her brow deeply furrowed as she puts all of her strength behind churning the blood as it's poured into the bucked.

…My mother's pretty scary.

Then, the pig was brought over to a specially prepared tree and strung up, upside down, from a sturdy branch. All of the blood that hadn't been completely drained from the body starts to drip down.

Now, it's time for the real butchering to begin. A man steps forward, wielding a thick, heavy butcher's knife, and vertically slits the pig's belly open.

That's about all I can remember. When I wake up, I'm no longer in the village, but instead in some room made of stone. Judging by what I can see of the ceiling from where I'm laying, this isn't my house. I blink my eyes to clear them, then I suddenly recall what I was watching just before I fainted. I feel terrible, suddenly.

It's strange, though. I can't shake the feeling that I'd seen something like this before.

What would it have been? Something where something got hung up, then carved apart…

It feels like it's on the tip of my tongue, but I can't quite make the connection. I don't think this is one of Maine's memories, I think this is one of mine. I think I saw something similar to this in Japan…

Oh, got it! I was at a fish market near the harbor in Ibaraki, and I watched them hang up an enormous goosefish and slice it apart! I remember it clearly now.

Now that I think about it, there are some similarities between slaughtering a pig and the live fish cleaning show. There are some things that really can only be eaten when they're really fresh, and I can understand how everyone seemed to find it such a fun sight to see.[2]

Well, I can understand it in theory, but I don't personally find it all that fun. For one thing, a tuna fish don't scream sorrowfully when you kill them, and the blood doesn't drip thickly out of it. Urgh, I really don't feel well…

I cover my mouth and roll over on my side, which causes me to fall off of whatever I was sleeping on with a thud.

"Oww…"

I push myself up with my arms to get a better view of my surroundings. It seems like I had been laid down on a smallish wooden bench. There's a fireplace nearby, with a fire crackling inside, so I don't feel cold at all. I don't, however, see anyone nearby, nor do I hear any voices.

…So, where am I?

As I try to figure out where exactly as I am, a soldier peers into the room, drawn by the thud I made when I fell down.

"Oh! You're awake," he says.
"Mister Otto?"

I sigh in relief, seeing a familiar face. If Otto is here in this stone building, then this must be either one of the waiting rooms or the night duty room at the city gates. Now that I know where I am, my anxiety gradually starts to dissipate.

"Ah, you remember me, then?" he says, relief showing plainly on his face. Since I look like a little girl, I'm sure he was worried that I'd start crying if I woke up and saw someone I didn't know, and then he wouldn't know what to do.

“I didn’t forget!” This man, after all, is one of the precious few cultured people in this world, and the man who is going to (hopefully) teach me how to read and write.

I give my best imitation salute, tapping my chest with my fist. Otto smiles wryly, ruffles my hair in response, and starts to explain my present situation.

“The corporal brought you here a little while ago, looking really embarrassed. Apparently, you collapsed in your wagon. He said he’ll come by to pick you up as soon as he’s done with what he needs to do in the village.”

I don’t know how long it takes to butcher a pig, but even after it’s butchered there’s a lot of processing work that needs to be done, so I don’t think it’s the kind of thing that’s going to be over quickly.

…Now that I think about, Tory said that there was going to be dinner made with really fresh meat, didn’t she?

It seems like I might be waiting here for quite some time. I’d brought the materials for my fake papyrus with me in the cart, since I didn’t know if I was going to be waiting around for a while in the village. Unfortunately, I don’t have any of it with me now.

“What’s wrong, Maine?” asks Otto, “Are you lonely because your mom and dad aren’t here?”
“…No,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m just wondering what I should do while I wait?”

I accidentally let slip my true motives. Otto stares at me for a little bit, then mutters something about remembering that I look a couple years younger than I really am.

“I’ve got just the thing, Maine,” he says, retrieving something from nearby. “How about we kill some time with this?”
“Whoa! A slate!”

Otto hands me the slate. He must have known that I’d definitely come through the gates today, so he would have brought it with him to give to me. He’s cultured, he’s considerate, he’s kind, he’s too amazing!!

“I have to stand guard at the gate today,” he says, writing Maine’s name at the top of the slate, “so how about you practice with this?”

He hands me a slate pencil and a cloth, then leaves the room. I see him off with a huge wave and a brilliant smile, clutching the slate tightly to my chest. As he closes the door behind him, I look down at the slate.

It's probably best to describe it as a kind of mini-blackboard, about the size of an A4 sheet of paper. It's a thin plate of dark stone, surrounded by a simple wooden frame. Both the back and the front can be written on, and on one side, thin lines have been painted to help you practice writing straight.

The slate pencil is a tool for writing on the slate. It's cool to the touch, hard, and seems to be made out of some kind of stone, but it looks to me like a long, slender piece of chalk. This slightly dirty cloth seems to be what I'll use instead of an eraser.

The letters Otto wrote at the top of the slate have gotten a little smudged, after I held the slate against my shirt a little while ago.

"Whoa, my heart's racing!"

I set the slate on top of the desk, and pick up the chalk. As soon as I grip it like I would a pencil, my heart starts pounding in my ears.

First, I try copying the completely unfamiliar letters that Otto wrote at the top for me. The mental strain of writing these new characters for the first time is almost too much, and my writing is wobbly and distorted. If this were Japan, the teacher would tut at me and have me start over. However, stopping now to erase the board would be a waste of time, and I'm far too happy right now to finally see *letters* again.

I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, then use the cloth to gently wipe off the left side of the board. I carefully write out another line, and this time it's much better than before.

I write my name, and erase it, and write it, and erase it… When I get tired of that, I switch to writing all of the haiku and tanka poetry I can remember in Japanese, and erase it, and write it, and erase it…

Ahhh, this is bliss. Reading and writing is such a joyous thing.

There may have been a fire going, but a cold draft still crept its way in. As I waited for however many hours it took for my family to come pick me up, playing with the slate

for the entire time, my weak constitution caused me to catch a cold embarrassingly quickly, and my fever came back.

“Your temperature still hasn’t gone down, so stay in bed,” admonishes Tory. “Don’t get up again!”
“…Fine.”

My parents are rushing in and out of the house, carrying in loads of vegetables and cramming them into the winter preparation room. In the kitchen, Tory has been boiling down the fruits that she collected from the forest and making jam. For the first time since coming to this world, I’m smelling sweet things, and the way it permeates the house makes me a little bit happier.

In the midst of stocking up on alcohol and bringing in pig meat, Tory had come in to bring me some soup for lunch. I had put my slate to the side, and taken the tray from her.

“I’m sorry, Tory,” I say.
“I mean it!”
“Oh? Do you promise not to tell on me?”
“I don’t make promises like that!”

That is, she doesn’t make promises. What even is a promise, anyway?

While the family clatters about, finalizing the preparations for the coming winter, I’m stuck lazing about in my bed, scribbling on the slate that Otto gave me. I practice writing my name, writing whatever sentences in Japanese that come to mind, and so on.

I really do want a book that I can record things in permanently. If I’m this happy from just being able to write, I’ll be even happier if I’m able to read book!

I have to get better soon, so that I can work on making my paper.

Translator's notes for this chapter:
1. Content advisory: somewhat graphic slaughtering of livestock.
2. Yes, seriously, people will show up at fish markets to watch fish be cleaned. It's a tourist attraction.

Chapter 12
Defeated by Ancient Egypt

About when I wasn't sure whether we were done or not with our preparations, winter flitted into the streets, and real, honest snow began to fall. During the winter, the entire neighborhood is locked in by the snow, so we're typically confined in our houses except on unusually clear days.

For me, if I have books to read, I can let myself be shut away forever, so whiling away the long winter months would be no trouble at all. I, however, don't have a single book. Will I be able to manage this long kind of isolation without them?

As the snow kept falling, it frequently turned into a full-blown snowstorm, forcing us to keep the doors and shutters tightly closed, with thick clothes stuffed into the crevices to try to shield us from the drafts just a little more.

"…Uuuugh, it's dark," I whine.
"We're in a snowstorm," says Tory, "there's nothing we can do about that."

The only sources of light in this locked-down apartment are a handful of candles and our stove. It may be daytime, but with our windows sealed so tightly not a single ray of sunlight can get in. This is my first time being in such a gloomy room without a single electric light to brighten it. Even when a hurricane knocked out my power, I had flashlights and the light on my cell phone for illumination, and they got my power restored very quickly. Trapped inside a gloomy room such as this, will I have no choice but to become gloomy myself?

"Hey, Mommy, is everyone's house dark like this?" I ask.
"Hmm," she says, "If someone has a little money, they can have quite a few lamps lighting up their homes. We only have one, though."
"Oh? Let's light ours, then!"

My mother sighs and shakes her head at me as I try to insist that lighting equipment is meant to be used. "We want to be careful with our oil, so we should avoid using it whenever we can. If it stays this cold and if the winter drags on, we'll run out of candles eventually, and that would be a big problem, you know?"

There's no counterargument to the way she talks about frugality. Come to think of it, my own mother in Japan was always talking about scrimping and saving and coming up with elaborate ways to spend as little as possible. To save electricity, she'd unplug the TV when it wasn't in use, although she'd then fall asleep with it on all the time. She'd brush her teeth the barest minimum of water to save on the water bill, yet she'd leave the faucet running constantly while washing the dishes… I wonder what she would do to lighten up this room, if she were in this situation.

"Maine, what are you doing?" asks my mother.
"I wonder if this will make the room just a little bit brighter…"

I've grabbed one of my father's old metal gauntlets from his old wartime days, polished them up a bit, and placed it next to a candle, trying to use its metal surface like a mirror to maybe make it seem a little brighter.

"Maine, stop that," says my father.
"I can't see what I'm doing," says Tory.

Two people rejected me at the same time! Unfortunately, these gauntlets aren't straight pieces of metal, and you can't really say that they're anywhere close to being shiny. They caught the flickering candlelight with a strange, irregular reflection, glimmering harshly in our eyes and making it even more difficult to see what we were doing.

"Ahh, it didn't work… I wonder if there's anything else I can use as a *"mirror"*…"
"Please don't do unnecessary things," says my mother.

After being quite clearly asked to stop, I give up on my plans to brighten the room using reflections. It's not like I'm trying to read right now, but I still sigh, lamenting the poor visibility, and go huddle by the warmth of the stove.

Soon after, my mother starts assembling a loom for weaving fabric. This isn't like one of the enormous, mechanical weaver's looms I saw back in Japan. This is much more primitive. I had been wondering how she was planning on weaving cloth in this tiny room, but it looks like we do have something that's just the right size.

"Tory, your baptism is coming up, so make sure you paying attention to this," says my mother as she carefully instructs Tory on how to work the loom. Tory, with a serious expression on her face, picks up a spool of thread.

“First, put the spool of thread here, then we prepare the warp. Run the thread straight through, like this…”

Making clothing starts by first weaving cloth out of the thread that our mother dyed during the autumn. You weave the cloth, then you sew the clothing, then you embroider it. Next year, we’re going to spin the thread too out of wool that we’ll buy during the spring. The only thing that we actually purchased in this entire process was the raw materials. It doesn’t look like you can just buy new clothing at a store, and fabric doesn’t seem to be the kind of thing that commoners can afford.

“That’s right, just like that. You’re a fast learner, Tory! Maine, do you want to try? If you don’t learn how to sew, you’ll never be called beautiful, you know?”
“Huh? Beautiful?”
“That’s right! When it comes to making clothing for your family, it’s important that they either look good to others or are very practical, you know? If you want to be beautiful, you need to know how to cook and sew.”

Ahhh, then I shall never be beautiful. …Wait, those conditions sound about right for being a good wife, but they’ve got nothing to do with being beautiful, right?

In my mind, clothing is something you buy in a store. When you go to the mall, each shop is overflowing with clothing of all sorts of styles and all sorts of designs. I never really showed much interest in clothing and picked outfits that would be good in more-or-less any situation, but even still my closet was full of choices. I didn’t really have more than two or three items that were either mended or hand-me-downs.

Sewing is something that I learned in Home Economics in school, but even then I used an electric sewing machine to do it. The only time I used a needle and thread was when I needed to sew on a button. To be perfectly frank, if it’s a woman’s job during the winter to spin thread, weave cloth, and sew clothing for her entire family, that’s going to be terrible. I have literally zero interest in doing any of that.

Oh, although, if I could maybe use cloth as a substitute for parchment, I’d weave as much as I needed.

“Maine, don’t you want to try?” asks Tory, from beside the loom.
“No, maybe next time.”

She may have been at the loom, but I don't think she wants to become a weaver. Tory seems to be more interested in becoming a seamstress's apprentice, so she wants our mother to teach her how to do needlework. I, however, am very small, so my hands aren't big enough, and, above all, I want nothing to do with any of that, so trying to teach me is entirely pointless.

"Okay, Mom, I'm going to go work on weaving baskets. Make me some good clothes!"
"Of course, leave it to me. They'll be the most stunning clothes you've ever seen."

My mother, confident in her abilities as a seamstress, works with enthusiasm. Every season, all of the children who recently turned seven years old gather at the church for their baptism ceremonies, wearing their nicest clothes. It's the perfect opportunity for a mother to display their skill in preparing the perfect outfit for their child. Perhaps she's thinking of this as some sort of public presentation?

Smiling to herself, she selects a new thread to use as the warp, one that's much thinner than the one Tory had been practicing with.

"This really is a fine thread," she says, smiling wryly as she thinks about how much time it will take to weave it into cloth. "Tory's baptism is in the summer, so she'll be too hot if I use too think of a fabric, right?"
"It's still winter, though," I say, "Won't Tory have gotten bigger by summertime?"

In the summer, food is more plentiful and children tend to be healthier and move around a lot more, which I think helps them grow up faster. At least, that's what all of my measurements showed when I was growing up. If these clothes are made to fit now, then they'll be too small by summertime.

"That's true, but I'll be able to make adjustments so they'll still fit just fine. What I'm more worried about is how small you are compared to your sister! I don't know if Tory's hand-me-downs will fit you for next year. I wonder what we're going to have to do then?"

That is definitely something to worry about. Good luck, Mother.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, my mother had selected a slender thread that seemed a little more sturdy than one made of wool and started weaving, and Tory has already started working on weaving the baskets she hopes to sell in the springtime. My eyes are starting to adjust, just a little bit, to how gloomy this room is, so it's time

for me to take the first step towards my ambitions and start working on making my pseudo-papyrus.

By weaving these grass fibers together, I'm definitely going to be able to make something kind of like a paper. I will never be outdone by the people of ancient Egypt! This is my battle to win!!

I lay out my fibers on top of the table. Back in Japan, I once wove a square coaster in a basket-weaving class. If I use that method, then making a postcard-size sheet will be the first step of my victory. I take my fibers, which are even thinner than the thread my mother's using in her weaving, and start weaving them together into rows and columns, tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

I may lack money, technology, and experience, but I shall fight on with my determination, my determination, and my determination!

Whoa, these are too tiny, I'm really straining my eyes. Ah! I messed up!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

These fibers are so slender that it's not easy for me to undo any mistakes I make. I have to rip apart huge chunks of it. As I wrestle with these tiny fibers with gritted teeth, Tory puts her basket weaving aside and comes over to take a peek at what I'm doing.

"Hey, Maine," she says, "whatcha doing?"
"Hm? I'm making *'pseudo-papyrus'*."

Tory takes another look at my handiwork, then tilts her head to the side with a puzzled look. It's clear by the expression on her face that she didn't understand anything I just said, nor can she figure out what it is I'm trying to do.

Yeah, it would be hard to figure out just from watching, huh? I haven't even managed to get one square centimeter together, so even I wouldn't be able to tell that this was going to turn into a pseudo-papyrus.

My mother glances over while she weaves her cloth, frowning at the tiny little motions I'm making with my fingers as I'm making my pseudo-papyrus.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

“Maine,” she scolds, “if you have time to play around, go help Tory with her basket-weaving.”
“Okay. When I’ve got some free time, I’ll go help her, so please don’t raise your voice.”

I’m absolutely not playing around here, so I absolutely don’t have any free time. In fact, this is the busiest I’ve ever been ever since I was reborn as Maine.

Ah! Another mistake! This is my mother’s fault for raising her voice at me. Aaarrrrgh!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

“Maine, really, what are you doing?” asks Tory.
“I just said, I’m making *'pseudo-papyrus'*!”

I don’t have enough patience left to answer her nicely, so my response comes out a little bit curt as I put all of my attention into weaving things tightly tightly tightly tightly… It’s not like I hate doing such fine work, and I’m doing something I actually want to do. I’ve got no choice but to persevere and keep powering through this.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

“Hey, Maine,” says Tory. “That’s not going to be very big when you’re done, you know?”
“I know!!” I snap.

I wasn’t really intending to lash out like that, but Tory’s observation hit a real sore spot and caused the words to fly out of my mouth before I could think about them. It’s already been almost a day, but it’s only about as big as my fingertip. I’m very aware of this fact.

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

The next day, I sit myself back down in front of my fibers, reminding myself of my determination, my *determination*. I'm absolutely not going to let Tory get under my skin today.

"Hey," she says, "what happened to that?"
"……"

I'm not going to let her bug me. I'm not going to let her bug me. What?! It got all loose! Grr! I must still press on, even like this, even if my heart is breaking as I'm forced to make my repairs!

Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…
Tightly tightly tightly tightly tightly…

"Hey, Maine—"
"Argh!" I yell, clenching my disintegrating pseudo-papyrus in my fist. "This is impossible! I can't do it! I've lost to this *'pseudo-papyrus'*!"

I'm discouraged to the point where I don't know if I'll ever be able to make this into even a postcard-sized sheet. I need to use extremely fine fibers if I want to make something that's dense enough to use as paper, but it is going to take such a ridiculously long time to make even a postcard-sized sheet. I don't think that there's any way I'll ever be able to prepare enough papyrus to make a single book.

Trying to make this postcard-sized papyrus also let me get a feel how the poorly final product would have turned out. The center of the sheet would have been tightly woven, but it would get looser and looser the closer you got to the edges, until it was full of tiny holes. There was no way I'd be able to actually write anything on the entire page.

"UuuuUUUUUUuuuuugh… I failed… my papyrus plan failed…"

Whether it's the gathering of raw materials, the difficulty of making it, or the raw time I'd need to spend per-sheet, there's no way I'd be able to mass-produce any of this. Even if I were to figure out how to make a perfect sheet, I couldn't make a book out of it.

"Be quiet, Maine!" says my mother. "Stop playing with that grass and go make some baskets!"

“You can’t make books out of baskets…”
“I don’t have any idea what you’ve been talking about, but you failed, didn’t you? That’s enough of that, work on the baskets!”

My mother’s getting a little angry, so I’ll go work on the baskets. After all that time weaving the tiny fibers together for my pseudo-papyrus, basket-weaving will be much simpler.

“Tory, Mommy… told me to come help you. Gimme some materials.”
“Sure,” she says, smiling. “Let me show you how to do it.”

With a rustle, she gathers up some materials to hand to me. As I take them, I shake my head distinctly.

“No thanks, I already know how.”
“Huh?”

Tory blinks, curiously, at me. I put her out of my sight and get to work. The grain of the wood is long and straight, like bamboo. I carefully join everything together, tightly enough that no gaps will be able to form. My plan is to make something like a simple tote bag. I pour all of my efforts into my craft, still fuming about the failure of my pseudo-papyrus. Once I finish tightly weaving the bottom panel, I take a moment to calculate how I’m going to pattern the sides of the bag before I start weaving. I design handles into it as well so that it will be easy to carry without hurting yourself.

Where it would have taken me more than five days to finish a postcard-sized sheet of papyrus, it took me just one to make a tote bag. For something made by an unskilled child, it actually looks pretty decent.

“Amazing, Maine!” says my mother. “I didn’t know you were so talented at this. Perhaps you should be a craftswoman’s apprentice in the future, hm?”
“Eh? That’s, um…”

My mother’s eyes are twinkling with pleasure to see her basically good-for-nothing child display this sort of talent (?). I don’t, however, have any plans to become a craftswoman. I have already decided that I am either going to be a librarian or work at a bookstore. Libraries and bookstores don’t really exist in a world without books, though, so those jobs don’t really exist either, but that’s just one small problem.

“Ooooh,” whines Tory, “Maine, how are you so good at this?”

Tory compares the basket she made with the one that I did, a dejected look on her face as she sees the difference in quality.

“Tory,” I say, “don’t worry. If you weave it really tightly and use a pattern like this one, it’ll turn out okay!”

Because, really, the difference here is actually a difference of experience. I used to take the advertising inserts out of newspapers, roll them up, and use them as raw materials to make little junk-art boxes in my spare time. I never would have thought that it would ever come in handy, though.

“Ooooooh… why’s Maine better than meeee…”

Uh oh. I’ve made a mess of her pride as an older sister. Even though it’s much easier for me if Tory treats me like her protege than her rival, I still messed it up.

“Um, uhhhh… oh!! Old lady Gerda taught me how to do it when I was left at her place. I’m always doing it over there when you’re in the forest, so I guess I’m getting pretty good. But when I’m making baskets, you’re doing other things, so you’re good at a lot of things that I’m not, right?”

I have never had to cheer up a crying child before, so I’m in a little bit of a panic right now. I’m trying very hard to explain things to her, hoping to cheer her up myself, but, honestly, I don’t really even know what I’m talking about.

“…I guess you’re right.”

I don’t know how much of that story she’s bought, but she cheered up a little bit when I reminded her that there’s things she’s better at than I am.

“Right!” she says, “I’m going to make a lot of them this winter, and I’m going to get better than you!”
“Okay! Do your best, Tory!”

I breathe a sigh of relief now that Tory’s mood has swung back around. Living like this is hard enough already, and doing so without Tory’s help would be even worse. If she

always just told me to do it myself, I'd be in serious trouble. I am *very* glad that I got her to cheer back up.

"Ah, Tory! If you use pull a little bit harder here, you can straighten things out and make it look a lot neater."

I may be good at basket weaving, but I'm still so empty inside. All I really want is a book.

I'm sitting next to Tory as she weaves her basket and explaining some of the tricks. I keep staring at my failed pseudo-papyrus, though. Papyrus isn't going to work, so what is my next step going to be? Through the winter, as I help Tory make baskets, I contemplate my future options.

Egypt has failed me. The difficulty level is far too high for a child like me.

If Egypt is no good, then what's my next idea? *Mesopotamia!*

Inventors of cuneiform! Bakers of clay tablets! Three cheers for Mesopotamian civilization!

Sure, they were ravaged by war and by fire, but their clay tablets survived. I'll make clay tablets, carve my writing into them, and bake them in the stove. This can work! Plus, since I'll be kneading clay to form it into these tablets, I can easily pass it off to the adults as just a child playing with clay.

I've decided! Come springtime, when the snow melts, I'll make clay tablets!!

Chapter 13
Interlude: My Savior

My name is Lutz. I'm five years old. I'm the youngest out of the four kids in my family. My older brothers are Zasha, Zeke, and Ralph.

I woke up this morning to a few faint rays of sunlight flickering through the cracks in our shutters. After days of a raging snowstorm, the sunlight is amazing in a big way.

It cleared up!!

Not caring at all about how cold the bedroom would get, I spontaneously throw open the shutters so I can look outside. The sky is a stunning blue, completely empty of clouds, and the reflection of the sunlight across the snowdrifts make the entire city sparkle.

"Whoaaaa…"

Clear days like this are extremely rare, so when they happen both the adults and children immediately head out to the forest. Missing the rush is really bad. I close the window and hurry to the kitchen.

"Lutz, hurry up!" says Ralph.
"Okay!"

Ralph has already finished eating, and is now clattering around trying to get ready. I warm up some hard rye bread[1] and eat it while dipping it in milk. As soon as I finish, I run to get dressed. Today is a perfect day for foraging. In order to harvest paru, which can only be found during the winter, everyone in the city rushes out to the forest on clear days like this. If you want to get enough for yourself, you absolutely can't be last to arrive. Throughout the year, there aren't very many opportunities to taste something so sweet, so everyone's absolutely hoping they can get any, whether it's a lot or even just one.

Today, I'm not just going with Ralph. Our older brothers Zasha and Zeke, who usually are working at their apprenticeships, are coming with us today. With four of us foraging, we're definitely going to find a lot. The four of us strap boxes and bags to our

backs and take off running. We dash down the stairs and out of the house. Our mother's already outside at the water well, and she waves at us as we run past.

"You're heading to the forest now? Be careful, don't overdo it!"
"Got it!"
"Hurry!!"

My mother is, as usual, gossiping with the neighbors by the well. It's really admirable how she's still able to hold these long conversations, even in the middle of this frigid winter. One of the women chatting around the well is Maine and Tory's mother. Both of our mothers are really good friends, so us kids were also always really close to each other.

"Tory and her father have already gone, you know?" she says. "Maybe if you hurry you can catch up?"

She didn't mention Maine's name. Probably, Maine is helping to watch the house. On days like this, she usually stays in bed instead of coming outside. Now that I think about it, she collapsed in the cart on pig-slaughtering day, just like last year. Last year, they brought her along even though she had a fever, but this year she'd seemed pretty healthy. She missed out on fresh sausage two years in a row now… I feel bad for her.

Maine's so tiny, frail, cute, and unreliable that I think of her like a little sister even though we're the same age. That reminds me, she had a weird request for some grass stalks while we were preparing for the winter. I wonder what that was about?

"Zeke! Check that tree!" says Zasha.
"On it!"

By the time we arrive at the forest, the paru hunt has already begun. Deep in the snow-bound forest lies a sweet flavor that can't be harvested except on extremely clear days. The eyes of every single person here are filled with a strange zeal.

Zeke runs towards the tree Zasha points him towards and starts to clamber up it. The rest of us start working to build a fire a little ways away from the tree. We shovel the snow away from a patch of ground, then ignite the firewood we brought with us. I glance over and see that Zeke has decided on the fruit he wants to harvest.

"Lutz, get ready to start climbing," says Zeke.

“Okay!”

I climb up the paru tree to the fruit that Zeke’s picked out. Paru trees are magical. It’s so white that it looks like it’s made out of ice and snow. It has many branches, so it’s easy to climb, but the fruits it produces are very close to the top. If this were a normal tree, I’d use a knife to cut the fruit free, but you can’t use knives to harvest paru fruit. This is the most dangerous part.

“Lutz, you ready?” asks Zeke.
“One moment,” I reply.

I shift over until I’m right behind him, then quickly pull off my gloves. I grab tightly onto the long, slender branch that holds the fruit that Zeke’s been working on.

“Ahhh, that’s freezing,” says Zeke. “It’s up to you now. I think it’s almost done, though.”
“Yeah, okay!” I say.

Zeke lets go and climbs down the tree. The stem that I’m gripping onto is freezing cold, just like ice, and the air itself is frigid. In an instant, all the heat in my hands starts to drain away.

Fall quickly!

In order to pick a paru fruit, you have to heat up the branch that it’s connected to until it goes soft and limp. However, you absolutely can’t use fire under the tree, because the tree’s magic immediately puts it out. So, you have to use the heat from your hands in order to warm it up. Bit by bit, the branch I’m holding onto starts to grow limp. The fruit, however, still hasn’t fallen.

Still not done yet? How long is “almost done”, Zeke?

I start to lose feeling in my hands, a painful numbness prickling through them. Right when the thought that I should switch out crosses my mind, the branch I’m sitting on suddenly bends a little bit.

“Hey, Lutz, let’s switch,” says Zasha, from behind me.
“It just needs a little bit more,” I tell him. “Hey, Ralph! It’s about to fall!”

As soon as Zasha grabs hold of the branch, the fruit pops off with a wet noise and starts to fall. Zasha's hands are far warmer than mine are after having held onto the branch for so long. The fruit, about the size of my face, falls straight down to the ground below.

"Go warm up quickly. Your hands are briiight red!"
"Yeah," I reply.

Zasha starts looking for the next fruit and moves to a different branch. I immediately put my gloves back on, then climb back down the tree, being extra careful not to fall. I run over to the fire immediately, throw off my gloves, and hold my hands above the brilliantly burning fire to warm them up. As I rub my hands together over and over by the fire, feeling slowly prickles back into my hands.

"I'm gonna throw it! …Rrragh!!"

Ralph has found the fallen fruit and is brandishing it triumphantly. With a huge swing, he throws it towards Zeke, then starts climbing up the tree to go relieve Zasha. Zeke picks up the fruit and puts it in a basket. Paru fruit are like huge clumps of ice when they're out in the cold, so you can be as rough with them as you want.

"Whoa, cold…, Zeke, switch with me."
"Roger!"

Zasha has been warming his hands by the fire, but now it's Zeke's turn to throw off his gloves and rub his hands together in the fire's warmth while Zasha goes back to the tree. Harvesting paru is a job that requires a lot of teamwork: the more people you have with warm hands, the better luck you'll have.

Alternating back and forth like this, we gather five fruits.

"It's getting pretty limp," says Zeke as I switch out with him.
"Got it."

Our sixth fruit was just about to fall when the afternoon sun started to shine into the forest from high above. The leaves of the paru tree sparkle brilliantly in the light, and the tree starts to rustle despite the lack of wind, as if it had a will of its own.

"Oh no! Get down quick, Lutz!"

The instant I heard my brothers call out, the branch beneath me starts to violently shake. I had been leaning forward just a bit to grab onto another branch, so I lose my footing entirely as the branch bucks under me. With one hand, I cling desperately to the branch I had been holding onto, dangling in mid-air.

“Whoa!!”

I reach up with my other hand and grab tightly onto the branch, trying to stop myself from falling.

“No, don’t, Lutz! Let go! Get down from there now!”

As soon as I started to let go, the branch suddenly went limp, warmed by the heat from both my hands. With a crack, it snaps off. The paru fruit and I plummet towards the ground.

“WAAAAaaaaa-”

The ground beneath the tree is covered in deep, deep snow, and since I was falling feet first after having been dangling from the tree, I land without any serious injury. Around us, other people are jumping out of the other paru trees scattered here and there.

The time for gathering is over.

The trees shine brilliantly in the light, their countless leaves rustling loudly. They stretch skyward, growing taller as if they’re chasing after the light. Soon, they tower over even the thickest, fullest trees in the forest. Despite there still not being any wind, their branches whip through the air, almost like a woman’s long hair swirls around her as she shakes her head. The unpicked paru fruit fly off in all directions as their branches flick about in the shimmering light.

As soon as the fruit all fly off, the paru trees start shrinking as if they’re melting away, and soon vanish into nothingness. Unlike any other tree in the forest, these are magic trees, which can only be found on clear days in the middle of the winter.

“It’s over.”
“Let’s go home.”

Everyone gathers up their bags full of paru fruit and heads for home. Every household is going to spend the whole afternoon working on processing the fruit that they gathered. It's hard, heavy work, but it's still kind of fun.

"First off, let's split these up."

Now that it's in the house, the fruit that was about the size of my face has gotten a little smaller and rounder now that its rind is melting away.

"Can you handle getting the bowl ready?"
"Yeah!"

We light the tip of a small stick on fire using the stove, then press it into the shell of the paru fruit. With a sharp crack, the skin just in that area splits open a little bit, and a milky white juice starts welling up through it. An amazingly sweet smell drifts out to fill the house, and I gulp as my mouth starts to water. So that we don't lose a single drop of the juice, we've placed the fruit in a bowl.

This juice, and its sweet, sweet flavor, is extremely precious. I want to do nothing more than drink it all down in one go, but I've decided that I'm going to pace myself very, very carefully. For now, all I can do is swallow my saliva as my mouth keeps watering.

Once we've drained out all the juice from inside, the next step is to crush the fruit and extract all the oil from it. Paru oil can be used both for cooking and for fueling lamps, which makes these fruits extremely welcome in the middle of the winter. Once we've pressed all of the oil out, the remains of the fruit are very dry. Once they finish drying, they're not really suitable for people to eat, but it makes for an excellent, nutritious feed for our chickens. Even better, it causes the flavor of the eggs to change a lot, which I'm also always happy for.

"May we come in?"
"Sorry to bother you…"

For a couple of days after that, we've had people constantly coming by, hoping to trade the dried-out fruit remains for eggs from our chickens. From my perspective, I don't know what I'm going to do when we've traded everything away for chicken feed. The chickens will be very happy about this, but all of the eggs that I could have actually eaten are vanishing, right before my eyes.

Please, don't bring us any more chicken feed. Bring me meat! While my older brothers tend to split the eggs evenly among us, they hog all the meat and I barely get any of it.

As I was contemplating my pending starvation, Maine and Tory come in, carrying with them some more fruit scraps. Inside their rough nilen bags are about two fruits' worth of scraps.

"Lutz," says Maine with an enormous smile as she holds out her bag in front of her, "can we trade these for some eggs?"

I really don't want to, but my mother would be furious if I turned them away.

"We kinda already have enough chicken feed… do you maybe have any meat?"
"Meat?"
"My older brothers eat all of it, so I don't really get any for myself."

During the winter, everyone is home nearly all the time, so my food winds up getting stolen from me a lot and I usually wind up staying hungry. I know that Tory and Maine can't really do anything about it, but I let my frustration slip out anyway.

Tory gives a wry smile. "You're not as strong as your brothers, so course they're gonna steal from you," she jokes, brushing past my dissatisfaction.

Maine, for some entirely unknown reason, shoves the bag right towards my face. "Hey, Lutz, why not eat this?"
"How the hell am I going to eat chicken feed?!"

I am completely blindsided by the fact that Maine, who I always treat so nicely, just suddenly told me to eat chicken feed. The sheer shock of it caused me to reflexively yell out, but Maine just stands there with a blank look on her face, head tilted to one side.

"…I guess it depends on how you cook it?"
"Huh?"
"The fruit's been squeezed totally dry, so you can't eat it. It's probably still tasty, though, so even these dried-out bits will be fine to eat if we just cook them right."

Maine is saying these completely unbelievable things with a perfectly straight face. I instinctively glance over at Tory to see what her reaction is. There can't be *anyone*

who'd eat chicken feed. Tory, however, gives me a tired, worn-out smile and shrugs her shoulders a little bit. For some reason, Maine really does seem to want to eat paru fruit.

"You…! Do you know how wasteful it is to *eat* a paru?! You don't just eat it, you squeeze out its juice and its oil and then give the rest to the chickens!! There's no way that we're just going to waste it by *eating* it!"

I don't think there's a single person in this house that lacks enough propriety that they'd turn to eating bird food. On top of that, taking something that we worked so hard to get and just eating it without making full use of it is unbelievable! I don't think there's a single person in this entire city who'd think of that except for Maine.

"Ummm… if you were going to give it to the chickens that would be okay, but you just said you have enough bird food, right? It'll be okay to use this to fill us up instead, then."
"Like I'm *trying* to say, people can't eat something that's so dried out!"
"It only turned into something people can't eat after all of the juice and oil was squeezed out of it. If we put some effort into it, we can definitely make it edible again!"
"Maine, umm…"

My strength leaves me. Maine is saying such unbelievable things with such an earnestly smiling face! What's this feeling? I feel like I'm not going to convince her no matter what I try to say. Is this helpless sort of feeling what they call a sense of defeat?

"Hey, Lutz," says Tory, quietly. Now would have been the perfect time for her to remind her sister that bird food isn't something that humans can eat, but instead she weakly hangs her head. "It's kinda hard to believe," she says, "but you really can make it edible. …I was even really shocked when I found out how good it was."

Eh? *Seriously?* She made you eat bird food, Tory?!

Somehow, Maine has already demonstrated this working in her own home. I see now, I guess I'm just arguing off of my own self-confidence, huh.

"Let's try it out real quick, okay? Lutz, do you have any paru juice left over?"

As she talks, she puts some of the dried-out remains in a little bowl. She adds about two teaspoons' worth of my share of the fruit juice, then blends it all together. She

scoops some up onto her finger and sticks it into her mouth, then nods to herself in satisfaction.

“Open wide, Lutz!”

Not only is my precious fruit juice being used for this, but I’m about to be fed bird food. I think this is probably going to be terrible, but after seeing Maine taste it as if it were a completely ordinary thing to do, I hesitantly open my mouth. She scoops up a bunch of the yellow stuff onto her fingertip and puts it in my mouth. As I close my mouth again, a sweet flavor radiates through it.

Only a little bit of juice went into this, but it’s still so sweet and it doesn’t feel dried-out at all. Every year, I stretch out my share of the juice for as long as I can by drinking only just enough for me to taste it, but if I blend it with the leftovers from the squeezing, I guess I could eat a lot more sweet stuff, right?

“It really is sweet, see?” says Maine, chuckling to herself triumphantly. My older brothers, who had been looking on suspiciously from a distance, simultaneously jump in on us.

“It’s sweet?”
“It’s really sweet?”
“Seriously? Lemme try, Lutz.”

All three of them charge forward, fingers outstretched, ready to scoop into the little bowl. I try to run away so that they can’t grab onto it, but with such a big difference in physique between us, I can’t escape. I can’t even dodge!

“Hey, let go! Stop pulling! Are older brothers only good for stealing their younger brother’s stuff?”
“My little brother’s things are my things!”
“Sweet things should be shared with everyone.”
“Ah-HA! Got it!”

I struggle in vain to resist the three of them, but they yank the bowl out of my reach. They take turns scooping the mix out of the bowl with their fingers. “Aaaaa!! My paru!!” I wail, but they completely ignore me. Soon, the bowl is completely empty.

“Whoa, tasty.”

“This was bird food, right?”

Just like mine did, all of their eyes go wide with disbelief, and they look over at Maine. She quickly looks to the side, shying away from all of the attention, but then says something even more unbelievable.

“Lutz, since we’re at your house, I can make it even better.”
“Seriously?!” shout all of us, simultaneously.

It’s completely natural for us to react like that. We’re all growing boys with healthy appetites, after all. Zasha, in particular, is the oldest, and he’s always saying there’s never enough food. Even if it is made from bird food, we are all extremely eager to have another tasty thing to eat.

“…Oh, although, I can’t do it if you guys don’t help. …I’m not very strong.”
“Alright, leave it to me!” I reply. It’s immediately obvious that Maine is frail and weak. If she needs our help to make us something delicious, I will help with all of my might!

“Lutz, don’t hog her attention. Let me help too, Maine, I’m way stronger than Lutz is.”
“Yeah, okay!” she says.

Suddenly, all of my brothers want to cooperate. I’m left wondering when it will ever be my turn for anything, but Maine looks absolutely delighted as she starts giving us orders.

“Okay, hmm. You two older brothers get a griddle ready on the stove. Lutz, you do the prep work, Ralph, you’re in charge of mixing. Ah, also, it would be really mean for everyone to only use Lutz’s juice, so everyone needs to share theirs! Come on, chip in, chip in.”

She claps her hands in a very mother-like fashion as she urges my older brothers on. Right now, Maine looks like an angel to me. With a single word, she saved me from having to give up all of my juice by myself.

“Lutz, get me two teaspoons of milk. Ralph, grab that spatula and start stirring this, please.”

Even though Maine is usually a huge hindrance, right now she’s looking extremely lively as she fires off instruction after instruction while everyone is moving around

her. Zasha and Zeke have dragged the griddle on top of the stove and are working on getting it fired up. Ralph, spatula in hand, is vigorously mixing things together as Maine adds them into the bowl. I'm running here and there on Maine's instructions, picking up the various things she says we need.

"Right, this is looking good. Next, do you have any butter?"

I run and get it for her. She uses a small spoon to take off a chunk of it, then climbs up on a chair next to the stove and slides it onto the griddle. Every one of our hearts skip a beat when they see what a precarious position she's in, but she doesn't seem to notice at all.

The butter on the griddle sizzles loudly as it shrinks away. A delicious scent fills the room, and I'm suddenly acutely aware of how hungry I've been getting. Maine reaches into the bowl Ralph's been stirring with a larger spoon, and drops a spoonful of thick, muddy batter on top of the melted butter. As the batter hisses over the fire, the sweet scent of paru mingles with the savoriness of the butter, and I'm almost overwhelmed. What she's making looks kind of like the potato pancakes my mother makes, but the scent is totally different.

"Alright, its your turns, make them like that, please," she says.

After demonstrating how to make one, she passes off the cooking duties to my older brothers, who do not need a chair to reach the stove. Maine, from atop her chair, continues to give directions. That's fine, though. We understood what we had to do as soon as she showed us, and making her wobble on top of such a tall chair would be too much for us to do. Since it's way less dangerous for us to do the cooking, my older brothers immediately take her spoon and get to work.

"When the bubbles start to rise like that, that side's done. Start flipping them over, please!"
"Got it!" says Zasha.

At Maine's direction, he scoops them up with a spatula, one by one, and neatly flips them over, showing that the underside is now a wonderfully cooked brown. They look so good that I almost start drooling.

"Alright, take then off, put then over there, and start more cooking in their place."

We gather up the finished things and put them to the side, then drop more butter and batter onto the pan. Whenever Maine said they were ready, we flipped them over and moved them to the plates.

Maine holds the first plate we finished with triumphantly, a huge smile on her face. "Voila! *'Simple bean curd hotcakes!'*"[2]

I actually have no idea what she just said. I don't really know how I'm supposed to react, so I tilt my head to the side.

"…Huh? What did you say?"
"Um…," she says, blinking in surprise. Her face scrunches up for a moment, as if she's searching for the right words. "The basic parucakes are ready!"[3]

Steam wafts up from the plates of parucakes lined up along the table. I want to dig into them immediately.

"They're hot, so be careful! Please, enjoy your meal~!"

Slowly, I take a bite. Shockingly, they're even more delicious than I thought they were going to be. They're light and fluffy, and don't have even a trace of the dryness of bird food. Unlike potato pancakes, these are extremely sweet, even without adding any jam.

On top of that, since they're stacked on each person's dish one at a time, I don't have to worry about my brothers taking them all!

"Hey, Lutz. If you make these, do you think you'll be able to fill yourself up easily?"
"I do! Wow, Maine, you're amazing."

Since people keep coming over wanting to trade for eggs, we have a lot of paru leftovers. Our chickens make plenty of eggs for us, and if we can trade some of those for milk, then we should be able to have parucakes all through the winter.

"I've got some other ideas about how to cook the squeezed-out paru," says Maine, "but I don't have the strength to do them myself."
"If you show us how to do it, we'll make it for you!"

After that, Maine continued to come over and imprint on us new ways to cook delicious things every time the weather cleared up and we went to collect more paru. Thanks to Maine teaching us how to cook, I rarely went hungry that winter.

Maine is my savior, but she's also very weak, so I want to help her any way I can.

I couldn't have noticed at the time, I was so immersed in the joy of parucakes, but this would become a huge influence in my life.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Everything has fantasy names in this series (like "nilen" being the stand-in for "linen"), so it's not literally "rye bread". However, the word used here is 黒パン (lit. "black bread"), which refers to rye bread without actually calling it rye. If we ever learn the in-universe name for rye, I'll update this.
2. Specifically, the bean curd she's referring to is okara, which is what's left of a soybean after you make soy milk or tofu. It's frequently used as animal feed, but is used in a lot of East Asian cuisine. It's dry and tasteless ordinarily, but you can make it into porridge or add it to baked goods.
3. She swapped out the n in pancake パンケーキ for a ru パルケーキ.

Chapter 14
Otto's Assistant

It seems that, in this town, whenever the weather clears up during the winter everyone always goes out to pick paru. Last time this happened, my father had a day off from work, so he went to go pick paru with Tory, but today he's busy with his job. As I started wondering if that meant that we were going to give up on paru after all, I noticed my mother gathering up her coat.

"I'm going to be going with Tory today," she says.

Paru are valuable winter fruit, To my eye, they're a fruit that contains a syrupy coconut milk, olive oil, and a sweet-ish sort of bean curd. Since I figured out that the remains of the fruit after all of the oil has been squeezed out can be used as a good substitute for bean curd, I've been able to expand the house's menu a little bit. Thanks to that, it looks like my mother's been increasingly motivated lately.

The bean curd hotcakes I made the other day at Lutz's house were the first sweets I've had in ages. Lutz's family raises chickens in their house, so they have a lot of eggs for trade, which means they have access to a ready supply of milk. I'm envious. Between the abundance of ingredients and the extra manpower that all the boys provide, it's way easier to cook at Lutz's house. The bean curd hotcakes… ah, I called them parucakes, didn't I? The parucakes left everyone deeply moved, and I was able to use paru oil, egg yolk, and a pinch of salt to make mayonnaise. With that and some more salt for seasoning, I was able to make something kind of like a potato salad, which also quickly became very popular.

…It looks like my reincarnation has made Lutz's and his brother's lives better, at least.

There's so many ways to use a paru that I want to get as many of them here in my house as I can. Unfortunately, I'm absolutely useless on any sort of trip, but I still want to cheer everyone on if I can.

Tory, fight! Fight! Mother, win! Win!!

However, when Tory and my mother head for the forest, there's still the problem of what to do with me. In any case, I have no strength, I'm sickly, and I'm worse than

useless. There's literally zero way that I can make a trip into the forest in the dead of winter. To make things worse, they seem to think that I might get up to some sort of trouble if they leave my at home by myself, so it seems they absolutely can't leave me to watch the house.

Isn't that kind of mean?

My father eats his breakfast, pondering deeply, as he gets ready for work. Suddenly, he claps his hands together.

"I've got it! Maine, how about you come with me to the gates today?"

I'd go with my father to the gate. Tory and my mother would go to the forest to gather paru. Then, on their way back, they'd pick me up from the gate. If they do that, the two of them can go pick fruit without worrying about me, and I won't be left home alone.

"Ah, that's a good idea," says my mother. "Let's do that! Tory, let's head out. We'll leave Maine with your father today."
"Okay!" says Tory. "Maine, we'll come by and pick you up later."

As my mother praises my father for his good idea, she gathers up everything she needs in the blink of an eye and leads Tory out of the house. Paru gathering seems to be something that only happens before noon, so it's critical that everyone gets there as soon as possible. This is probably because everyone snaps all the fruit up in a heartbeat. It is such a delicious and useful fruit, after all.

"Well then, shall we head to the gates?"

Being baby-sat at the gates, huh… Well, it's a change of pace from being here in the house all the time. If Otto's there, then I can probably get him to teach me some new letters, too…

Frankly, I am starting to get really tired of being inside this house. Ever since I failed at making pseudo-papyrus, I have been reduced to only being able to do one of two things: play with the slate and make baskets. I never could have thought that, without books, I would have so much free time and so little idea of what to do with it.

By the way, lately, I've had "Come, Spring!"[1] and "Radio Calisthenics"[2] playing in my head. Until spring finally comes around, I can't go outside and I can't work on making my clay tablets.

Also, I've started doing radio calisthenics every morning so that I can build up enough strength to start going outside. My family has been looking at me strangely, but I think that it's very important for me to do everything I can to get in better shape. To be painfully honest, my physical condition wasn't something I really paid much attention to back in Japan, so I don't know exactly where I should be starting from in my exercises.

"Oh, Daddy. Is Otto going to be there today?"
"Ahh, I think so?"
"Yay!"

Now I'm actually looking forward to being baby-sat at the gates. I cheerfully go about my own preparations. Since I'm going out, I'll need to bring my slate. I layer on my clothes and pull on my coat, then I slide the slate into the tote bag I wove earlier this winter. With that, I'm ready to go.

"Let's go, Daddy!"
"…Maine, you really like Otto a lot, don't you?"
"Yeah! I love him," I reply.

After all, he gave me this slate to help me learn the alphabet, and he's my teacher (or so I've unilaterally decided). Wouldn't it be impossible for me *not* to like him? Honestly, I probably like him more then I like my father. In the interest of maintaining harmonious human relations, though, I clamp my mouth closed so that I don't actually say that last bit.

"Cold!" I exclaim, as we step outside.

The air itself is frigid. The faintest of winds is blowing, and that alone is enough to cause a painful chill to cut straight through to my bones. My face is tingling so intensely that, even despite my laziness, I'm thinking that I'm going to have to figure out how to make some kind of moisturizing cream out of some of the paru oil we get today.

On top of that, the snow is so deep that I can barely walk. There's probably some knack to walking on top of snow, but I didn't grow up in a snowy part of the country so I don't know it. After only two steps, my tiny child legs were stuck deep in the snow, and I couldn't move them no matter what I tried. I have no idea what to do next.

"Daaaaddy! How do I walk in this?"

My father turns around, a startled expression on his face, and walks back towards me, his arms out to the sides for balance as his legs sink into the snow. "…It's okay, I got you," he says. He hangs my tote bag from his wrist, then picks me up by my sides, lifts me up high, and deposits me on his shoulders. "Be careful not to fall!"

"Whoa… so high!"

I'm way higher up than I was before, even when Ralph carried me on his shoulders. I don't, however, feel like I'm in any danger of falling. My father, the soldier, has broad, firm shoulders, providing both a sense of stability and a sense of security. He's very different from my other father, who I think was a salaryman in a sales department.

"Hold on as tight as you can, okay?"
"Okaaay!"

It's been a long time since I rode piggyback, so I'm a little bit excited. I cling tightly to my father's head as he starts trudging through the snow. There's a narrow pathway cut through the snow, but it doesn't seem to have been made with a shovel. Instead, it looks like it was made by people carefully following in each other's footsteps, one by one, as they left for the main street.

"Maine, you should know, Otto's already married."

We had been walking in silence for a while when those words suddenly tumbled out of his mouth. He seems to have been considering what to say for a while.

Huh? Did I… say something about wanting to marry him at some point? I know I didn't say anything about wanting to marry my father, though.

"Ummmm… so, what?"
"Well, Otto's the kind of man who doesn't think of anyone but his wife."

What kind of parent uses this kind of diversion on his five-year-old daughter, you idiot? Would it be okay if I played the straight man and smacked him on the head now?

“Okay, but what’s wrong?”
“……”

Argh, really?! *Now* you go quiet? You’re such a pain! I’m not going to play along, father. Do you really think that I’m going to say something like “but Daddy you’re so much more amazing” or “but Daddy I love you so much more” right now?

“Oh,” I say, “are you saying that since Otto is the kind of man who loves his wife so much, he’s really amazing?”
“…No.”

Sulking fiercely, my father continues trudging forward in silence. After some time, we finally arrive at the gate, me still riding atop the shoulders of my troublesome father.

“Good morning, sir,” says the soldier stationed at the gate, bowing his head for some strange reason. After a moment, I remember that bowing your head in greeting is one of the social customs here. Then, he bows his head again, maybe for me, perched on top of my father’s shoulders.

“Lihit,” says my father, “this is my daughter Maine. I’ll be leaving her in the night duty room until the afternoon, when her mother comes to get her on her way back from picking paru.”
“Understood, sir.”
“Maine, go to the night duty room. Otto’s in there, so that’ll be fine, right?”

Whoaaa, that sounded almost petulant. Huh? Maybe… is my father so jealous of Otto that he’s getting childish? Are human relations breaking down here?

“I’m only really looking forward to learning some new letters from him, you know,” I say.
“…You don’t need Otto for that.”

Sorry, Otto. I tried to smooth things over, but I think I might have only made it wose.

At the beginning of this whole mess, I really was only excited about learning new letters, but I have no idea where my father’s thoughts have been wandering to.

“I’m coming in,” says my father, knocking on the door to the night duty room as he opens it and walks in. The night room is lit by both a brilliantly glowing fire in the fireplace and a lamp shining on a desk. It’s way brighter than it is back home. Otto is sitting at a desk close to the fire, filling out paperwork.

“Otto!” I say.
“Corporal… and Maine? Why’s she here?”
“She’ll be staying here while her mother’s gathering paru. Take care of her.”

He tersely… no, sharply explains the situation while he lowers me down from his shoulders. Otto’s eyes go wide and he glances back and forth between his pile of paperwork and my father. Clearly, he’s been shaken by having being abruptly ordered to be a babysitter.

“Huh? Umm, but, I… need to finish the budget and the financial report…”
“Maine,” says my father, completely ignoring Otto’s protests, “it’s warm in here. Stay here and take care not to catch a cold.”
“Yes, Daddy!” I wave goodbye to him as he leaves the room.

I turn towards Otto. “I’m sorry, Otto.”
“Huh?”
“You know, I was super happy when you gave me the slate, and I’m even more happy that I get to see you again.”
“Oh, that’s good. I’m also happy to see you again, but…”

He gives me a bit of an awkward smile, then looks a little confused, as if he’s wondering why I needed to apologize for that.

“I was kinda praising you earlier, and my daddy started to sulk.”
“…Oh, boy…”
“I’ll be really quiet until my mommy comes and picks me up, so could you teach me some new letters?”

From the parchment and ink that’s spread out on top of the desk, it’s obvious that he was in the middle of working through some paperwork. I don’t want to be too much of a hindrance, but I’m not going to let this chance to learn more letters slip away.

“Sure, why not? Since it’s you, Maine, I know you’ll practice quietly…”

I quickly take out my slate. The slate pencil clacks against the surface as Otto writes out new letters, mumbling to himself. At this point, I've lost count of the many hours I spent playing with it by myself, so by now I feel a strange sense of confidence.

"Maine, if you get another fever, your father's going to be even more upset than he is now, so sit over here."

With a wry smile, he shuffles his things over, giving me his seat in front of the fireplace. I completely agree with his reasoning, so I don't restrain myself too much as I sit myself down.

"Thank you! I can definitely practice here."

These letters seem to be part of an alphabet. It's not a syllabic script like hiragana, or an logographic system like kanji. This feels like an alphabet where both pronunciation and meaning change depending on how you spell things.[3]

For a while, the room was quiet, with only the clacking sound of pencil on slate and the scratching sound of pen on parchment breaking through the stillness.

When I feel like I've memorized the letters in front of me, I look up from my slate. Otto is looking at his parchment, deep in concentration as he works through his calculations. Next to him is some sort of abacus-like calculation device, but I have no idea how to use it. When I was in elementary school, we practiced using an abacus to add and subtract, but I don't know if the same methods apply to this thing.

When it seems that he's come to a break in his calculations, I ask him a question.

"Otto, what's this?"
"I'm working on the financial report and drawing up the budget. We have to come up with a budget for the year during the winter and submit it before spring comes around, but there aren't very many soldiers who are good at math. I'm the one with the most confidence in my ability to keep track of money, so the task of doing the budget and the financial report falls on me."
"They've given you a really difficult job, huh."

When I look over the parchment, I can't really read the words, but there's three columns of numbers lined up next to them. The first two look like price and quantity,

and the last one seems to be the multiplied total, I think. Is this an equipment requisition form?

As I ponder, I notice a mistake in the calculations.

“Otto, isn’t this wrong?”
“Eh?”
“Here, this is 75 and this is 30, right? So, isn’t that 2,250? Ah! This one’s wrong too.”

I can read the numbers, but I don’t actually know how to describe multiplication in this language, so I have to describe things in a roundabout fashion.

“Eh? I thought you couldn’t read! How can you do these calculations?”
“Heh heh heh, my mom taught me numbers when we went to the town market! So, I can look at the numbers, and I can do the math, but I can’t read any of this part over here.”

When I say that I can’t read the words next to each entry, Otto starts to ponder something. “Nah… but maybe…” he mumbles to himself, as he broods.

“…Maine, I *have* to fix this. Could you help me out?”

Is it really okay for me to take over something like this? Not only is this departmental information, and probably a breach of security, but isn’t letting a child help you out with something like this really bad? Rather, aren’t you really desperate, since you’re asking for help for a child, albeit one with surprising math skill?

Not only did he say he *had* to fix it, he’s asking for help from a child. This really is abnormal. Since he’s putting himself on the line like this, I feel like I want to help him as best as I can.

On top of that, he’s got something I really want, and I finally have the bargaining point I was searching for.

“Okay. I’ll help you out, if you give me slate pencils and keep helping me learn the alphabet.”
“Huh?”

His eyes go wide again. He clearly didn't expect a little girl like me to suddenly thrust conditions like that on him. This was exactly the response I was expecting, so, with a little chuckle, I explain the present situation.

"Like I said, my mom taught me all my numbers. I still don't know letters, though, so I want you to teach them to me."
"Teaching you is fine, but… slate pencils? Those aren't very expensive, you know?"

Just like Otto says, slate pencils are available for sale in the town market. In reality, they're something that I actually got my mother to buy for me. So, I know they're pretty easy to go out and buy. However, it's a lot harder for me, personally, to obtain them.

"My mommy bought some for me a while ago, but she doesn't really want to buy me any more."
"Why's that?"
"It's probably because I spend so much time playing with the slate. I use them all up as soon as she buys them for me…"
"Ahahahahahaha!"

Since I spend countless hours every day playing with the slate, the pencils wear down to nubs very quickly. Since I don't get any pocket money for myself, you could say that finding a way to get more slate pencils is a matter of life and death for me.

"A… anyhow!" I say. "My time isn't so cheap that I'd work for free, you know!"
"…Your time is still really cheap, though," says Otto, smiling wryly.

Otto has now officially become my writing tutor. It looks like I wasn't wrong about these being equipment requisition forms, but it looks like he's in the middle of validating the math on someone else's paperwork.

"What should I do?" I ask.
"Could you check to see if anything here is wrong? In any event, I don't know where the errors might be hiding. It's going to take a while to get through all of this."

It should be obvious, but there aren't any computers here, so drawing up these documents takes time, but going through and checking every single calculation in this document is more work than one person alone can handle.

“There’s other soldiers that can do math, huh?”
“…That’s true, but I can do it, and I’ve got a pretty good reason to do it too…”

Somehow, it looks like Otto has some sort of circumstances behind why he became a soldier. I really want some juicy information, so I’m itching to ask him to go into more detail, but there’s a lot of validation work ahead of us to be done. I sit tight, knowing that there will be plenty of time for gossip when I see him next time.

“Maine, do you want to use the calculator?”
“No thanks, I don’t know how to use it, so I’m fine for now. I’ll work things out on my slate.”

It’s way easier for me to do calculations on my erasable slate than it would be to do so on a blank form. I start to work through the numbers by hand, using my slate. Numbers were drilled into my head from such an early age, though, that the first symbol that pops into my head is “9”. With some effort, I make sure that I’m properly using the numerals of this world.

“Whoa, this is much easier. I’m moved! You’ve seriously saved me. I never thought that validating those calculations could go so quickly! If you can do this much math, Maine, you could definitely be a merchant some day. If you do, I can introduce you to the merchant’s guild, okay?”

It seems that for several years, Otto has had to compile all of the budgets and make all of the financial reports all by himself. Even though all we did today was checking everything, Otto is still so deeply grateful. If I were to be in a position to make a lot of books, then the best way to turn that into a bookstore would be to join the merchant’s guild. I’ve made an important connection in a really unexpected place. On top of that, I’ve earned some recognition as Otto’s invaluable assistant.

“Maine, if you want to learn how to write, then I’ll help you beat them into your skull, okay? If you do that, then you can help me write up all the papers, too.”
“Really?! Woohoo!!”
“Huh? That got you excited?”

Otto’s eyes may be going wide with shock, but if he’s going to seriously teach me the alphabet, then it’s only natural that I’d be happy, right? And if I’m helping out with official paperwork, that means I’ll get to touch parchment, right? And write letters onto a page with real ink, right? Isn’t that such a joyous thing?

“Maine, sorry to keep you waiting.”
“Let’s go home!”

Today I did more math than I’ve done in a long while, so it was a great workout for my brain. I’m so mentally fatigued that the inside of my head feels numb. It’s a pleasant feeling. This was an incredibly productive day.

“Thanks, Otto! I’m really grateful for your help.”
“Yours too, Maine. You saved me a lot of time.”
“See you in a bit, Daddy! Good luck with your work!”
“Yep,” he says, tersely.

It’s been a few hours, but my father is still in a bad mood. Or maybe, did it get even worse?

Why?

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. “Haru yo, Koi” (春よ来い, “Come, Spring!”) is a 90s JPop song.
2. Radio calisthenics is basically a nationwide exercise program that’s broadcast throughout Japan to help people stay active.
3. "Alphabet”, in a proper linguistic sense, refers to something like the English alphabet, where each letter corresponds to a specific phoneme, and multiple letters are strung together to form full syllables. The various forms of Japanese writing aren’t actually true alphabets, but are either syllabic scripts where each character represents a full syllable or logographic scripts where each character may have one or more syllables and represents an entire concept.

Chapter 15
Tory's Hair Ornaments

A few days after I was baby-sat at the gate, my mother finally finished the brand new outfit she'd been working so hard on for Tory. It's essentially a one-piece dress, made from unbleached cloth, with a straight, clean silhouette. The hems of the neckline and sleeves are embroidered with a simple design, and the whole thing is tied together with a wide sash of cool blue cloth, accentuating the outfit.

Cute things are cute, but… it looks a little unsatisfactory to me. In Japan, when kids visit shrines on *Shichi-Go-San*[1], the kimono and dresses that they wear are all very showy and colorful so that they'll look good for their photos. Or, at least, that's the image the photography studios keep feeding us in their ads.

"What do you think, Maine? Isn't it cute?"

If you wanted to, you could make it a little bit more fluttery, or maybe add some more decorations. Either of those things would make it so much cuter…

I may be saying that to myself deep in my heart, but my mother looks so proud of her handiwork and Tory looks so pleased with her new dress that I guess it's already more than good enough. This isn't an outfit that you're going to have a picture taken of for your own self-satisfaction, this is something that's going to be worn to a temple. It's entirely possible that wearing something flashy would be frowned upon. I don't think I should really comment on Tory's clothing right now, since I don't actually know any of the things that are apparently common sense in this world.

I have found one thing I *can* comment on, though: her hair. Regular care may have made it glossy and smooth, but she always wears it in exactly the same way, in a single thick three-part braid behind her. If we were to change up her hairstyle for her baptism ceremony, I wonder what people would think of some tasteful hair ornaments.

However, whatever I do, I can't actually get started until I learn what the customs are here. Maine was a very young child, after all, and she didn't really have any memories of baptism ceremonies at all.

“Tory,” I say, “it’s really cute! …But, what about your hair? You’ve got to decide what sort of hairstyle you want for your baptism ceremony.”
“I was going to just go like this, though…?”

…Tory, that’s not good at all. This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, put a little more thought into your fashion choices.

Unintentionally, my head drops down in exasperation. I pull myself together and find a new angle to continue my questioning. If Tory’s hairstyle isn’t going to change, maybe we can add some sort of decoration to it.

“Ummm… so, what about ornaments? Are you going to use any?”
“Oh, hmm… it’s summertime, so maybe I’ll pick some flowers somewhere?”
“Whoa, don’t do that! Your dress is too cute for that!”

She’s just casually talking like she’s going to pick whatever flowers she manages to find lying around! Haven’t you heard of coordinating an outfit?! …Ahh, of course not.

Here, it seems like it’s weird for a child to wear their hair up. It’s okay for it to be braided, though, or to have ornaments in it. If Tory doesn’t have any, it should be okay for me to make them for her. I’d be able to make some sort of lacework, I think. I’ve got plenty of time until summer, so I don’t think I’ll have any problems.

“I’ll do something! Leave it to me, Tory. I’ll definitely make you even cuter.”

Immediately after I made that declaration, I suddenly realize that we don’t have any needles for lacework. My mother has large needles that she uses for knitting, but they’re too large for me to make lace with.

Wh… what should I do?!

My father’s the only one in the family who seems like he’d be able to make things like tools. Tory may have made my hair sticks, but the one who shaved it smooth so it was easy to use, then stained it with oil was actually my father.

I surreptitiously sneak a glance at my father, trying to gauge his mood. It’s already been a few days since I’d gone to the gate and Otto had agreed to help me learn to write, but my father has been in a pretty foul mood ever since. He doesn’t really look

like he's in the mood to be pestered, but I don't think he'll get less angry at me if I just leave him alone.

Honestly, my father is being pretty childish, so it's up to me to be the adult here. If I read between the lines, it's almost like he wants me to say something. If I fawn on him a little bit and pester him to do something for me, I think I might be able to not only get him to make me some needles, but also cheer him up, killing two birds with one stone.

"Daddy, daddy!" I say.
"What?"
"Daddy, you're really good at making stuff, right? You're the one who made Tory's doll, right?"
"Y… yeah, that's right." He clears his throat. "Ahh, what is it, do you want a doll of your own?"

He's keeping an expression on his face like he's still angry with me, but there's a little glimmer of anticipation in his eyes as he glances over at me.

"Nuh-uh," I say. "I want some knitting needles."
"Needles? Can't you use the ones your mother has? I think she'll lend them to you, right?"

As he answered me, a supremely dejected expression falls over his face. Waves of misery pour off of him, like he's had enough just wants to smooth things over already.

He waves his hand, shooing me, as if he's telling me to just go away in a manner that's not very becoming of a parent. At the very least, I'm going to make him hear me out.

"I need needles that are way smaller than the ones Mommy has. I want needles that can knit thread, not yarn. …Daddy, these need to be really skinny, and I think making them would be difficult. Can you do it?"

I look up at him with glistening, upturned eyes, hands clasped in front of my chest, in the cutest begging pose I can possibly make. I don't know if the Japanese standards of 2-D cuteness apply in this world, but there's no doting parent in any world that doesn't find their own daughter adorable… so I think this is probably cute enough. Whether it's due to my cuteness or not, my father scratches at his stubbly chin, contemplating.

“Hmm… is wood okay?”
“Yeah! Can you do it?”
“I’ll try.”

His fatherly pride stimulated a little bit, he immediately stands up and heads towards the storage room. After rummaging around for a while, he comes back out with a few different knives and some wood, then sits down and starts to whittle. In his experienced hands, the work goes very quickly. The knife whispers as it shaves away at the wood, and in the blink of an eye all of the bark has been stripped off, leaving only the dense, hard core. He looks closely at the knitting needles, then, skillfully and carefully, starts whittling the wood down into the same shape.

“If those needles are sized for wool,” he asks, “does this look about right for thread?”
“Umm, can you make them a little bit skinnier?”
“Like this?”
“Like that!”

With the proper size now determined, he changes to another knife, and starts to carve the hook ends of the knitting needles. I can’t say he’s as good as a real craftsman, but this is something that I can’t do myself at all, so I praise him anyway.

“Amazing, Daddy! They’re already looking great. Do you think that when you’re done, you can polish them really smooth and oil them so that they don’t catch any thread? I’d really really appreciate it.”
“Sure, leave it to me.”

Being praised by his daughter has brought back a lot of his fatherly confidence, it seems. He carefully polishes each needle, in fine spirits.

Heh, just as planned.

While a dark smile flickers over my face, Tory beams angelically, the very picture of pure innocence.

“Maine,” she says, “looks like Dad’s finally in a good mood again. That’s a relief.”
“Yeah, yeah, it really is!”

Don't say anything about how I was the reason my dad was in a bad mood. Definitely don't say anything about how I thought fawning over my father was troublesome, so I left him alone without bothering to read the mood. I'm just a little girl, after all, so please treat me as if I don't know anything about bad moods.

My father's still been working hard on polishing the needles. It looks like they're almost ready to be used, so I start looking for thread. The ample stockpile of thread that my mother had prepared to use for Tory's dress has almost all dwindled away. There should be some sort of thread available that isn't the unbleached white thread that my mother used to make the cloth for the dress. However, the colorful threads that were used to make the sash and the trimmings aren't in long enough pieces to really make cloth out of.

"Mommy, can I have some threads dyed this color?"
"What do you want to do?"

My mother clearly never thought that I'd ask for thread, so her eyes momentarily grow wide with surprise before she puts on a dubious frown.

"I thought I'd make some *'lacework'*," I reply.
"Eh?"
"I want to make something to put in Tory's hair."

My mother back in Japan didn't just turn advertisements into paper baskets. She kept bouncing around, getting swept up in one kind of handicraft after another. It wasn't any of her business, but she wanted to get me into hobbies that weren't just reading books, so she dragged me behind her as she went through this crafting boom. In other words, my list of miscellaneous crafting skills is rather large.

Really, among all the handicrafts on my list, lacework is one of the ones that can make a useful finished product. I'm actually quite confident that I'll be able to make hair ornaments, assuming I have the tools and materials. My life as Urano may be over, but I have no idea what sorts of knowledge I have that might be useful in the future.

However, my mother in this world has no knowledge of my former identity, so she seems to disapprove of my request for some thread. There's no doubt in my mind that she's thinking that I'm going to do something useless again, so anything she hands over to me will wind up being wasted.

“If you’re making hair ornaments, those aren’t really going to be useful except at the baptismal ceremony, you know? It’s a waste to use up our thread on such an inconsequential decoration. Flowers are more than enough for a hair ornament. Tory’s already cute, you don’t need to make her any cuter.”
“If you can make something cuter, you must! Cuteness is justice!” I cry, clenching my fist tightly.

My mother, for whatever reason, lets out a sigh, then turns away as if the conversation is already over. I quickly reach out and grab her skirt.

“Hey, Mommy,” I beg, “I’d be okay with just these leftovers here. Daddy worked hard to make these needles for me, and I really want to use them. Let me just try, please?”

I look over at my father, trying to hint that those needles might wind up being worthless. If he got my meaning, or if he realized that his work might be in vain, or maybe even if he was afraid that I’d lose all of my new-found respect for him, he speaks up in my defense.

“It’s rare for Maine to take this much interest in sewing, so what do you think about just letting her have the remnants?”
My mother ponders for a bit. “…Hm, I guess you’re right,” she says, a reluctant expression on her face.

She picks out a few threads and hands them over to me. They’re short enough that it might actually be difficult to use them.

“Woohoo! Thanks, Mommy! I love you, Daddy!”

I throw up my hands in celebration. My father looks at me with exaggerated pleasure, grinning with his mouth almost hanging open. He suddenly puts way more strength into polishing the knitting needles, a huge smile on his face. If I may be perfectly honest, it’s kind of creepy.

His mood *does* seem to be a lot better, though. He’s acting a little weird, so… it’ll be better if I just leave him alone, right?

My father gives me the needles, which have been stuffed full of his overbearing affection. I immediately get to work weaving lace. I’m going to make a lot of tiny lace flowers.

Tightly, tightly, tightly, tightly…

Much like my failed attempts to make pseudo-papyrus, making lace involves a lot of tight, tiny weaving and a *lot* of patience. Even if I acknowledge it, though, because the flower that I've been working on is so small, it took me about fifteen minutes to finish a single one. I let the yellow flower roll off my hand and onto the table, then start working on the next one. Tory looks at the little lace flower admiringly, then peers at it closely, tilting her head to once side with a doubtful expression on her face.

"Isn't it kinda too small?"
"I'm going to put a lot of them together as decoration."
"Huh…"

If I made a big one, it would be really bad if I started losing interest before I was finished, right?

I keep the real reason to myself. I really let my big mouth get away from me when I started talking about hair ornaments, so I *really* need to make sure I finish something, which is why I decided to use a design that I can give up on halfway and still wind up with a usable result, like a collection of tiny flowers. Truthfully, back when I was Urano, I'd always decide I didn't like working on huge designs and wind up giving up halfway through. I need to limit how much that might hurt me.

"I thought about making lace or ribbon, but I don't think I could connect these threads since they're not very long. Plus, it would be weird if the color changed partway through, right? So I'm going to make a bunch of tiny flowers."
"Wow, Maine, you really thought this through."
"Of course! It's cause I'm doing it for you."

I thought through many things before starting this. The final product is going to be made out of whatever I get done in the end, so I can finish it even when I get tired of working on it. Plus, this isn't going to waste any thread, since I can always finish up my current flower and start a new one of a different color when I start to run out.

Tightly, tightly, tightly, tightly…

Once I've finished making a few more tiny flowers, I feel like someone's watching me. I glance up and see that my work has piqued my mother's curiosity, and she's carefully

watching what I'm doing with my hands. My mother is good enough at sewing that she's thought of as a "beautiful" woman by this place's standards, and it looks like she's pretty interested in my handiwork. She picks up one of my completed flowers and rolls it around in the palm of her hand.

"…This doesn't seem to be too difficult," she says.
"You already knit a lot with wool, Mommy, so if you learn a few patterns I think you'd be way better at making these than I am, right? Want to try?"

I hand over my needles. My mother starts to knit, her motions fluid even as she studies the flowers. She occasionally picks one up and rolls it around in her fingers, confirming the way they're woven. In the blink of an eye, she's already finished one.

Whoa. As expected of the sewing skills of a beautiful woman. Just by looking at how something's stitched, she figured out how to make it herself. She's so different from me. I had to be taught how to do this step by step, grumbling the entire time.

"Amazing, Mommy."
"Well, *I'm* amazed you knew how to make something like this, Maine," she says. "I've knitted scarves and sweaters, but I never thought to knit decorations like this."

Everyone in this world has their hands so full with just surviving that nobody has the spare time to think about decoration. And, if nobody's making it, then maybe lacework itself is something that nobody's seen before. I was raised in a world where sewing decorations onto clothing was only natural, so I knew about it, but it looks like even tiny decorations like these aren't really known of here.

"So, Maine, now that we've made a lot of these flowers, how are you going to decorate Tory's hair?"

It seems like my mother can't tell how all the little flowers rolling around on the table are going to be assembled into a finished product. I need to explain things to her in the simplest possible way I can think of.

"Ummm… so we take these scraps of fabric and make them into a circle, and then sew the flowers on one by one. It'll look like a bouquet of flowers after that, right? Then, we wrap that around a *'hairpin'*, and… wait, *'hairpin'*?!"

In the middle of my explanation, all of the blood suddenly drains from my face. My mother jumps, startled, as I suddenly raise my voice.

“Maine, what are you yelling about all of a sudden?”
“…Oh no, what do I do… I don’t have a *'hairpin'*, huh…”

This is really bad! There’s no hairpins in this world, or at the very least I haven’t seen any in this house. I haven’t seen any elastic hairbands either. This is a world where everyone ties their hair back with string. How the hell am I going to finish this off?!

“D… D-d-d… Daddyyyy!”

I immediately abandon my plan to leave my father alone. I rush over to him, taking up my begging posture again. Describing a hairpin by words alone is going to be difficult, so I take out my slate and draw a picture as I explain it to him.

“I need one side of it to be pointy, like my hair sticks, and then the other side needs to be flat, like this, with a little hole drilled into it. It’s kinda like my hair sticks, but shorter. Can you do it?!”
“Sure, this is actually simpler than those knitting needles.”
“Really?! Daddy, you’re amazing! Now more than ever, you’re the best!!”

I hug him tightly in a gratuitous display of overflowing gratitude. “Heh heh heh, leave it to me,” he says, quietly. It seems like he still feels the need to compete with Otto.

My father cheerfully whittles a somewhat short hairpin for me. I sew together the lace mini-bouquet, then thread it through the hole in the hairpin, kind of like I’m sewing on a button.

“Alright, done! Tory, put on your new dress and come over here!”

Tory puts on her summer dress, then comes over to sit in the chair closest to the fire. I scoot my own chair over behind her, then kick off my shoes and climb up to stand on top of it. I undo her braid, comb it out, then loosely weave together hair from both sides of her head. Tory’s hair is naturally wavy and fluffy, like it’s permed, so I bring it back and weave it so it’s half-up.[2] This hairstyle on her gives off an amazingly showy atmosphere.

I tie up the center of the braid tightly with a simple cord, then stick the hairpin through the knot so that it won't fall off. Against Tory's blue-green hair, the little flowers of blue, yellow, and white seem to shine.

"Yep, cute!" I say.
"Wow, really!" says my mother. "You look very cute, Tory."
"Maine, you're pretty skilled with your hands," says my father. "You might not be strong, but we can probably find you a job that needs nimble fingers like yours."

Tory smiles shyly as the family admires her, turning this way and that to show off. She reaches up to feel the hairpin, but after a little while she puffs her cheeks out in frustration.

"Maine," she says, "you put everything in the back, so I can't see it at all, you know?"
"I guess so, but… I can't really help you there."
"But, I don't really know what I look like right now."

We don't have any mirrors in this house, so there's no real way for me to show her what she looks like. I think about what I should do for a little while as Tory's face grows unhappier and unhappier. I try to show her on my own head, pulling the mini-bouquet out of her hair and sticking it into mine, next to my own hair sticks.

"It looks kind of like this! What do you think?"

As soon as she sees the hairpin in my hair, Tory cheers loudly. "Whoa, cute! Amazing! Hey, Mom. Does my hair look like that?"
"Well, Maine's hair is straighter and all done up, and the colors of the threads we used match your hair much better. It definitely suits you more, Tory."
"Ahh, really… I see! Hee hee hee…"

Her cheeks flush red and she smiles so wide that it looks like she might crack her face in two. She pulls her hairpin from my hair.

"Thanks, everyone! I'm super happy."

With spring just around the corner, we have made Tory a perfectly coordinated outfit. If I'm not mistaken, she's easily going to be the most eye-catching girl at this summer's baptismal ceremony.

After that, my mother got really into doing her own lacework, and the needles my father made for me suddenly disappeared into my mother's sewing kit.

…Well, that's okay, I guess.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. A Japanese festival for seven, five, and three-year olds, which is generally considered a kind of coming-of-age ceremony. The name literally translates to "seven-five-three".
2. Like this, probably. (I had to look it up to make sure I got the description right, so I figured I should link the reference.)

Chapter 16
Bring Me To The Forest

The snow in the forest has begun to melt, and the tiny sprouts of new plants have begun to appear. That's what Tory told me, when she came back from there. The children have started heading to the forest again to forage, which means that my long, idle hibernation where I had nothing to read and too much time on my hands is over at last.

Finally, I can make my clay tablets! I really want to head to the forest as well, so that I can get to work.

Tory said that there's still a lot of snow left, walking is difficult due to treacherous footing, and there's not very much out there to gather right now. However, I don't particularly care if there's a lot of stuff to gather or there's nothing at all.

What I'm after is slimy, clay-like earth, which means excavation. If I can just get to the forest, I've already won.

Of course, there's no way that anyone would let me head out to the forest by myself. I need to get Tory to supervise me. So, I've drawn up close to her in order to beg for her kindness.

"Please, Tory! I wanna go to the forest too, and make friends with the other kids. Could you take me along with you, please?"
"No way, you can't even walk that far."

Her answer hasn't changed at all. If she's going to keep having this little confidence in me, I'm facing total defeat here.

"I've gotten a little stronger! If I can't go with you, I can wait for you at the gates! Pleeease!"

Tory hesitates. I've been doing radio calisthenics every day, eating as much as I can, and going out with Tory when she goes downstairs to the well to wash the dishes. I've worked hard to boost my strength, and I think I'm just about ready.

"…If Dad says it's okay," she says.

Giving up on just shooing me away, she foists responsibility off on my father. Practically, though, if I were to end up waiting at the gate, I was going to need to ask my father anyway, so this was inevitable. Next, I must persuade my father.

"Daddy, can I go to the forest? I haven't gotten sick in a while!"
"Hmmm, that is true…"

During the winter, I took extra good care of my health, and the rate at which my fevers spiked went down. I only got five of them!

Ah, that's not a lot, you know? That's way lower than it once was. My family even kept admiring how much healthier I was, saying "whoa, amazing" and so on.

Since my fevers didn't come very often, I was able to keep a lot more food down. As a result, naturally, my nutritional intake was way better, and I've even grown a bit! Most likely, my physical strength has increased as well.

"If I can't make it for some reason, I can rest at the gates with you! Well? Well?"
"Hmmmmm," he says, thinking things over.

He didn't dismiss the notion immediately, so I think I might actually have a chance with him, unlike Tory. I cling to him desperately, trying to get his approval.

"Once I get used to it, I'll make it through! There's three-year-olds that go to the forest, right? So it's not impossible that I could do it!"
"Ahh, well… sure, there are, but they're the kinds of kids that get into trouble when they're left alone at home, so they have to get brought along."
"…So, if I get in trouble, I'll get to go?"
"No need to do that," he scolds. "Don't be stupid."

If I can't somehow secure my father's permission, then when springtime comes around and my mother goes back to work, I'm going to be left once again in the care of old lady Gerda. That would be very hard on my mental state. Absolutely no way. I don't want to have to look after all the other children left with her.

"Daddy, are you worried about me because I'm not very strong? How can I make you think that it's okay if I go out to the forest?"

“Hmmm, let me think…”

My father closes his eyes, deep in thought. I wait breathlessly for his reply.

“…For now, just come with me to the gate.”
“Only to the gate? How long is ‘for now’?”
“Until you can walk all the way to the gate without help. Once you can walk without slowing everyone down, you’ll be okay to head into the forest.”

As I expected, it isn’t quite so easy to get permission to go out to the forest. It feels like the clay tablets I’ve staked my ambitions on are getting further and further away. Working to build my strength by walking to and from my father’s workplace at the gate is probably the biggest compromise the completely unreliable me can squeeze out.

Tch, I really wanted to go, too. My tablets…

I can’t go to the forest, but at the very least this plan means that I don’t have to stay with old lady Gerda. This is an acceptable compromise.

“…Okay. I’ll do what you said!” I say, nodding once in agreement.

My father suddenly looks relieved, all the tension draining from his face. Did he really think I wasn’t going to agree, and that I’d start running amok?

“Hey, Daddy. When you said you wanted me to walk to the gate, do you mean just going back and forth?”
“Nah, I’ll have Otto teach you some more of the alphabet,” he says. “Eh?! …Really?”

I thought that my father burned with seething jealousy over how Otto was teaching me how to write. I wonder what caused this sudden transformation? I tilt my head to the side doubtfully, and my dad’s eyebrows furrow a little bit.

“Maine, you’re pretty weak, but Otto says you’re very smart. He says that you’d be very suited to a job that required you to use your brain, when it comes time to find you one, so if you learn your letters now, you can find a job that’s a little easier on your body.”

Otto convinced my muscle-brained, excessively doting father of that? He really is wonderful. I'm getting a little misty-eyed. I did not at all expect that I'd get official fatherly approval for Otto to teach me how to write.

"You're good with your hands, so I was thinking that you could find a job using those, but there's a lot more money, and a lot less strain on your body, in jobs that require thinking."
"Jobs that require thinking? Like what?"

It never actually occurred to me that there might be jobs in this world that relied on brainpower. It seems that there are jobs where the labor is mental, not physical, huh?

"Let me see… You could work as an amanuensis, copying out official documents for government officials and aristocrats. I heard that if you do that, you can bring your work home with you if you get sick."

Being paid to write out documents sounds kind of like a notary public, huh. If it's like that, and I had the right qualifications, then I probably could bring work home if I needed to. I'm not really sure, though, because I don't have any qualifications.

"Otto is a soldier now, but he was originally a trader, and he still has ties with the commerce guild. The kinds of jobs that your mother and I could refer you to wouldn't really suit you, I don't think, so you should be grateful for Otto's connections."

…My jealous, immature father is suddenly looking like a fine example of parenthood!

"Thanks, Daddy. I'll try my hardest!"

He pats me lightly on the head, then turns to Tory.

"Tory, will you help out?"
"…She can't do it," she says, shaking her head.

Tory is refusing to listen to a single word of her little sister's wish to come along to the forest. She shakes her head vigorously, all the way back and forth. Not trying to dismiss her concerns, my father nods slowly in comprehension.

"I understand, but, Maine's going to be in trouble if she never gets strong enough to go to the forest."

“I guess so, but… she’ll get in the way…”
“That’s right. Right now, she’ll just be a hindrance.”

Both Tory *and* my father quite plainly said I am a hindrance. I already know that myself, but hearing them affirm it right in front of me like is still a blow to my pride.

“If she can at least get to the point where she can keep up with you, then even if she can’t go all the way to the forest, she’ll come with you as far as the gate. Until she can make it to the gate herself, I’ll be the one to go with her, but when she’s ready I hope you’ll cooperate too.” “…Okay, I’ll try.”

Tory, the burden of responsibility weighing down on her, nods her head in agreement. My shoulders, however, still slump. It seems that my family’s estimation of my strength is *still* the lowest it could possibly be.

I see… they still don’t think I’ll be able to walk all the way to the gate, even though I’ve been going all the way up and down those stairs to get to the water well lately without being out of breath at all…

The next day, as the sun climbs high in the sky, my father and I set out for the gates. I only follow along with him when he has the day shift. Guard duty operates on a three-shift system. The morning shift lasts from when the gates are opened in the morning, until about noon, the day shift then goes until the gates are closed in the evening, and the night watch guards the gates from when they are closed in the evening until when they are opened once again the next morning.

Until I can walk all the way to the gates by myself, I accompany my father to the gates on his day shift, then I either go back with Tory if I’m feeling up for it at the time or I wait for my father to finish his duties and go home with him.

“Make sure Maine doesn’t overdo it,” says my mother to my father. “Keep a close eye on her!”
“Ahhh, of course,” he replies. “Let’s go, Maine!”
“Bye, Mom!”

Waving goodbye to my worried mother, I grab my father’s hand and head off for the gates. Making it all the way down the stairs doesn’t give me much trouble anymore,

but by the time we make it out to the main street, I'm starting to feel a little out of breath. Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever walked out this far on my own. I'm usually being carried on someone's back, riding in a wagon, or riding piggyback on someone's shoulders by this point.

"How are you holding up, Maine?"
"I'm… still… fine…!"

If I give up here, they'll never let me go to the forest. My unrelenting obsession forces me to say I'm fine, but my physical condition is anything but fine right now. My body is heavy, and I'd like nothing more than to just sit down right here.

"You're not fine at all! …Up we go!"

Of his own accord, my father stops walking, turns around, and picks me up. I cling desperately to him, my breath rough and ragged as I suck in air.

Impossible! This will kill me! My family's absolutely correct. There's no way I can make it to the forest.

My father winds up carrying me in his arms for over half of the trip to the gate. When we arrive, he carries me into the night duty room so that I can rest. In all honesty, I don't think I can do anything that *isn't* taking a break. I am absolutely dead tired, so when my father lays me down on one of the benches inside, I lay there for quite some time. After noontime has come and gone, I finally am able to sit myself upright.

"Hey, Daddy. You said Otto's going to be teaching me how to write, but that takes a lot of time, right? Is that okay? What about his other work?"

I'm pretty sure Otto has gatekeeping duties, and I'm pretty sure that teaching me the alphabet is not one of the usual duties of a soldier.

"Otto's job actually is teaching people how to write. We have new recruits coming in."
"New recruits?"
"After the springtime baptism, we get about five new apprentice soldiers. It's Otto's job to teach them how to read and write."

It's a good thing for a soldier to be able to read and write. If you can't write down the names and titles of the people who pass through the gate, then you can't be a gatekeeper.

"Am I going to be learning with them?"
"Yeah, that's the plan. But, you're not there as a new recruit, you're there because you're Otto's assistant."
"Assistant?"

Can a kid like me really be an assistant like that? This might just be me talking, but I look like I'm three years old. I don't think anyone would believe for a second that I really was Otto's assistant.

"Maine, you helped Otto with his work before, right?"
"Yeah, with the financial reports and the budget… but those were just calculations."

I only helped Otto out that one time. Since he looked so ashamed to have asked me for that favor, I felt like I shouldn't tell anyone about it, not even my father. Otto, however, seems to have told him, even though that might have gotten him in trouble.

"Ahh… I might have put too big of a burden on Otto when I asked him to do all of that work, all by himself, with nobody to help him. He suggested that you might be interested in helping him, in exchange for learning how to read and write."

Although I'd decided that being taught the alphabet was my reward, I actually wasn't joking when I said I wanted to be Otto's assistant.

"You're going to basically be Otto's personal assistant, but it's not allowed for kids who haven't been baptized yet to have a job. So, we're going to say that he's really teaching you how to write, which is why you're coming to see him at the gates. Your salary will be in slate pencils, and you'll have time off whenever you're not feeling well. Otto wanted to emphasize that this isn't easy work, you'll be helping him with budgets and more."

Apparently, Otto specifically asked for me so that I can learn how to write and help him out with the paperwork. Is he thinking ahead to next year's budget season? On top of that, by going through his superiors, he was able to get my slate pencil salary officially approved from the budget instead of having to pay me out-of-pocket. As expected of a merchant! It feels like he's working to maximize his own profits.

“Maine,” calls Otto, “We’re about to start, are you ready?”
“Yes!”

I grab my tote bag and head from the night room to the training room. In one corner, a wooden table and chairs have been set up. Five boys sit there, probably the apprentice soldiers my father was talking about.

“This is Maine, the squad leader’s daughter. She helps out with some of the paperwork here. She wants to learn how to write, so she’ll be joining us today. Don’t make a big deal out of this.”

After giving me that kind of introduction, Otto begins his lessons. He writes out what appears to be the fundamental letters of the alphabet. Well, I haven’t memorized all of these, so it can’t be helped that this is the first step.

“These are all of the letters of the alphabet.”

Today, we’re practicing five out of the thirty-five letters of the alphabet, writing them out on our slates while repeating their pronunciations. Since I was already taught a little bit about some of these letters, memorizing these takes little effort at all.

“…Maine, you really do learn things quickly,” says Otto.
“I really like doing things like this, more than I like doing things physically,” I reply.

Unlike the ordinary children of this world, I am already very much accustomed to studying. I also have no problem at all with studying on my own, and my memory is very good. Basically, this is something that I both like and am very good at. Placing me next to these rank beginners, clumsily sweeping their poorly-gripped pencils in amateurish strokes, makes them look even more pitiful by comparison.

“Mister Otto,” I say, “I think we should move on to the next thing soon.”
“Eh? Already?”

It feels like it’s only been about thirty minutes, but it looks like the boys think that sitting still and practicing writing is torturous. They’ve started fidgeting in their seats, proof that they’ve already had enough.

“It’s hard for someone who’s just picked up a slate for the first time to focus on one thing for so long. We’ve practiced writing, now we should do some math, then draw maps of the area around the town, then learn the things soldiers need to know. We should take breaks every once in a while to move around. If we experience a little bit of a lot of different things during the day, we’ll master them a lot better.”

It’s probably best to think of these children as elementary schoolers. In Japan, we’d never sit down an elementary school student and force them to write _hiragana_[1] over and over for an entire day. They wouldn’t be able to handle it, and the boys of this world, who aren’t accustomed to sitting still at all, would fare far worse.

“Let’s work on calculations next,” I say. “How about we start with counting?”

Since everyone’s been shopping before, they all know how to count up to about ten. However, there’s a few kids that don’t quite seem to get it, so we spend some time writing out the numerals from zero to five while reading them aloud. Again, the boys all start to fidget in their chairs after a while, so I wrap up the lesson and send them away to work on their physical fitness.

“Let’s wrap up studying for today. Make sure you memorize the letters and numbers we learn today by next time. If any of you don’t have them down, you’re going to spend a lot more studying in here, alone, until you get it right. It’s very important that you learn these!”

The children spread out through the room. I’m no longer needed in the training room, so Otto leads me back into the night duty room. He frowns at me, disapprovingly.

“Maine, you’re being too soft,” he says. “They’ll never learn that way.”
“Nuh-uh. If we know that learning is hard for them, and that it’ll take extra time, then it’s okay if we only teach them that much at once. Don’t compare them all to me!”
“Ah… right…”

Otto scratches at his face, his stubble crackling under his fingertips. It seems like he’s realized that he might have been subconsciously comparing the other children to me.

“On top of that, if we go over it next time and they haven’t memorized it, they won’t get to go home until they do, right? So now it’s a matter of personal duty. That’s not soft at all, you know?”

“I see! That’s actually pretty strict towards these kids that have just barely started to work.”

A grim smile crosses Otto’s face. I smile back at him, and breathe a soft sigh.

I never asked about helping out with teaching the new recruits as well, but if kids like that are my classmates, my own studies will get nowhere.

Otto comes back into the night duty room, then spends the remaining time with me doing private tutoring. He teaches me how to write certain vocabulary words, then I practice them. While I’m busy, he works on his paperwork.

“Well, Maine, it looks like you’ve got the alphabet memorized, so let’s get you started on some vocabulary. I’ll teach you some of the most common words.”
“Okay!”

Mr. Otto does in fact teach me vocabulary words, but a lot of the words he’s teaching me have to do with equipment or gatekeeping duties. It really does look like he has his sights set on making me help him write up official documents. If he can make me more useful, then he’s probably going to draft me into helping out with all of the paperwork come next year’s budget season.

Some of the first words he taught me were “character reference”, “nobleman”, “letter of introduction”, and “petition”, you know? How are these “the most common words”? At the very least, if we started by learning the names of goods, I could learn words like “hay” or “foodstuffs”, and the names of kinds of weapons and armor…

My pencil clacks against the slate as I continue to spell out words. Suddenly, my father’s voice cuts through the room. It’s almost time for the gates to close, and it seems like Tory and her friends have just returned from the forest. I put my slate back in my tote bag and run outside to meet everyone.

“Tory!” I call, waving.
“Let’s head home, Maine.”

There are a few other children with Tory. They all have bags and boxes strapped to their backs, packed full of their tools and the things that they’ve gathered. A couple of them give me strange looks, eyeing my single tote bag suspiciously.

“Eh? 'Maine’?” says one of them.
“Is that Tory’s little sister? I’ve never seen her before.”

I hide behind Tory, shielding myself from the impolite stares of these filthy children.

“Maine doesn’t come outside very much,” says Tory, chuckling wryly, “so it’s only natural you wouldn’t have met her.”

It seems like the fact that I never show my face at any of the big local events is causing these kids to treat me like they just saw a rare monster spawn. Tory tries to reassure me that they’re just curious and not trying to tease me, but their stares still hurt.

“Maine, you’re going back with us?” asks a familiar voice.
“Lutz!!”

Inwardly, I breathe a huge sigh of relief, seeing Lutz’s familiar face in the group. I look around, trying to find Ralph, but there’s no sign of his red hair and strong build anywhere.

“Huh? Is Ralph not with you today? Is he okay?”
“Ralph turned seven this spring, so he’s working today.”
“Ahhh…”

Ralph was only seven? That’s what Maine’s memories seemed to say, but since he was so strong and so caring, I thought he had to actually be at least eight or nine. Huh? Is it just me, or did Lutz grow a bunch over the winter? It looks like this world still obeys the laws of heredity.

As I’ve been carefully considering these matters, we’ve started walking. These kids have been out in the forest all day and want to get home as quickly as possible to get their heavy packs off of their backs, so they’re walking at a pretty decent pace. Tory and Lutz notice that I’m in danger of getting left behind, and call out to the group to slow down for me.

“Hey, everyone, don’t rush!”
“You doing okay, Maine?”

I was planning on powering through and keeping up with them, but no matter how hard I tried the group started steadily pulling ahead. Children are merciless. There's no way they were going to wait up for me.

"Everyone, you're going too fast…" says Lutz.
"Sorry, Lutz," says Tory. "Do you mind slowing down for Maine? I have to keep an eye on all of the kids."

Tory is the oldest of this group of unbaptized children, so she needs to look out for everyone in the group, not just her little sister.

"Got it," says Lutz. "Maine, take your time. I've got a lot of things I'm carrying today, so I won't be able to carry you too if you get tired halfway through."
"Okay," I reply.

I may have been left behind, but Lutz falls back to walk with me on my way home. I don't want to get tired and burden Lutz any further, so I slow down to conserve my energy.

"What were you at the gate for, Maine?" he asks.
"I was studying the alphabet," I reply. "The alphabet? You can write?!"

Lutz is extremely shocked by this revelation. His eyes gleam with respect as he turns to look at me, but it only makes me feel uncomfortable. I wouldn't really describe myself as being able to write, since I only really know a few specific words.

"I can't really write anything but my name very well. I'm still practicing."
"Whoa, Maine! You can write your name?!"

Huh? Did that somehow make him respect me more?

I never would have thought that just being able to write your name would be so impressive. Although, now that I'm actually thinking about it, if the village elder is the only person in an entire village of peasants who can read and write, then it really is comparatively amazing that my father can write down other people's names.

I consider that first-grade level skill, but in this world, it's really worthy of respect…

I suddenly realize how precious being able to help out with paperwork is. It did seem like Otto was more interested in my upbringing than the other soldiers. If I decided that it was good enough for me to just be able to write other people's names, there's no way he'd be able to teach me how to write up official documents.

"Hahh…… hahh……"
"Maine, you okay?"

In my case, learning how to write is the easy part. Building up my strength is what's painful. Lutz helps me along the entire rest of the way, but by the time I make it back home, I'm so exhausted that I can't even speak.

As expected, I'm immediately stricken with another fever, lasting two whole days.

"That's why I said not to push yourself too hard!" huffs my mother, but I seem to have actually gotten a little stronger. Ordinarily, I'd be out of action for five days, but this time I was actually ready to head back out on the third day.

After a while, I settled into a routine. I'd walk with my dad towards the gate, although I got tired about halfway through, requiring him to carry me the rest of the way. I spent the day practicing how to write and helping Otto with calculations. When the children came back from the forest, I went along with them, but would immediately lose my breath and fall behind, causing Lutz to hang back with me, worried. Then, after I got home, then I'd be out for another few days.

This lasted for over a month, but then I definitely started to get stronger. I started with one day of going out and three days of rest, but then I got it down to two days, and then I started only resting every other day. At that point, I was still going very slowly, but I was somehow managing to make it all the way to the gate on my own. After that, I started going two, even three days in a row, still only taking a day off in between.

When I first made it to the gates five days in a row, my family was thrilled.

"You did it, Maine! That's the first time you've made it all the way without a break," said Tory.
"You've really gotten stronger. I'm so proud of you!" said my father.
"You should be about ready to head to the forest," said my mother.

Right after my family finally praised me, I was immediately hit with another fever, taking me out for another two whole days. It seems like things didn't work quite as well as I planned.

Three months after I started going back and forth between the gates, I'm finally given permission to head into the forest. Here and there, I can see glimpses of summertime. It seems that spring is at its end.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. Hiragana is the most basic syllabary in Japanese. It's the first set of characters taught to students.

Chapter 17
Three Cheers for Mesopotamia!

Today is the very first day I will be heading to the forest on my own two feet. Today, I'm leaving my tote bag and slate at home. Instead, I've got a wooden basket on my back like everyone else (although mine is smaller), containing a shovel that I'll be using to dig up the earth. I can't help but think of a wooden spatula when I look at this shovel, though. To be perfectly honest, I think this spatula is going to be even less effective at actual excavation than the little plastic shovels that kids use in the sandbox. Doesn't anyone else see this?

As I brandish the shovel, which absolutely looks like it is going to break immediately, my father grabs me firmly by the shoulder. He turns me around to face him, and starts giving me the same lecture that he's been constantly giving ever since we decided that I could go to the forest.

"Maine. All you're doing today is going to the forest, then coming back. Everyone's going to have a lot of things to carry on their way back, and they're going to be tired. I want you to rest up while you're out there so that you'll have enough energy to make it back with them by yourself. Understand?"
"I got it!"

My father's face grows very serious for a moment, although I can't tell if it's just because of my answer itself or because any of my frustrations at being told this countless times might be starting to spill over. He turns to Tory.

"Tory," he says, "this might be tough, so I'm counting on you. Please talk with Lutz to make sure he knows that Maine is going to have to make it back before the gates close."
"Okay. Today we'll make sure to leave early," she replies.

Tory already has an overflowing sense of responsibility, but when she hears my father's request, her sense of duty burns brightly as well. Today, she seems a little more strict than usual.

By the time we head outside, there are already other children gathered near the well, boxes and baskets strapped to their backs as well. There's a total of eight of us, ranging

from the young kids like me who haven't really started growing up to the older kids like Tory and Fey, who are a little bit bigger and stronger. Fey leads the way with his pink hair while Tory brings up the rear. As for me, I'll start at the front with Fey, but by the time we reach our destination I'll have fallen more or less to the rear.

"Alright, Maine. Let's go! Don't slow down, okay?"

I may be used to walking to the gates by now, but this is my first time going all the way to the forest. Thus, Lutz will be setting the pace for me. Over the last three months while walking between the gates and my home, Lutz has been gradually been figuring out what the upper bounds of my walking speed are. It's thanks to him that we'll be going at a speed that's only as fast as I can comfortably go.

"Thanks, Lutz," I say.
"No, thank *you*, Maine, you've been a big help too," he replies.

The other day, we had to finish off the last of the leftover squeezed paru. It seems that paru, which can apparently only be harvested during the winter, go bad very quickly once the weather starts to warm up. So, in thanks for everything they've done for me so far, I modified the recipe for bean curd hamburgers and taught them how to make paruburgers.

I made a sauce by boiling down a kind of fruit called a "pomay". It looks at a glance like a yellow bell pepper, but it has a very tomato-like consistency and flavor on the inside. To finish the dish off, I melted cheese on top of it. The gentle sweetness of the paru added an unexpectedly deep flavor to the dish. I was a little shocked myself, and I made it!

Incidentally, Lutz literally started *crying* earlier, and his older brothers followed suit. They seem to have been deeply moved by the fact that I managed to double the amount of delicious food that they were able to eat during the winter. Carla, their mother, thanked me from the bottom of her heart for how easy my style of cooking is on their family's finances. Having to feed four kids must be extremely rough. Engel's law is absolutely murderous when you're at the low end of the scale, huh?

"Maine, why couldn't you have told us about paruburgers during the winter?!" Lutz complains.

“Well, if you want to mince beef, it has to be very fresh, you know? Also, mincing meat is really difficult, and I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to convince everyone to help me…”
“Ahhh, yeah, it’s tough, but we would have done it for the sake of your cooking!”

I completely lack the strength required to work a knife for long enough to actually mince meat, and there was no way my mother would have agreed to doing something so difficult, so until now I haven’t been able to eat anything like a hamburger. I’m very glad that Lutz and his family were able to help me, and I consider myself very lucky to have been able to enjoy paruburgers with them.

We keep a steady pace towards the forest, chatting about cooking along the way. Talking as we walk made the long journey actually kind of enjoyable, but as soon as we hit the forest all of the fatigue catches up to me at once, crashing over me like a wave. While everyone goes off to start foraging, I sit myself down on a sizable rock and try to recover as much of my stamina as I can. As I sit on my rock, hunched over and sucking in short, ragged breaths, Lutz comes over, obviously concerned.

He pats me on my back. “Maine, you’re going to need to get used to coming out here. Otherwise, it’ll be a big problem once Fey and Tory have their baptisms.”
“…Why’s …that?” I gasp.

I certainly am aware that Tory is about to get baptized. After all, she has new clothes for the occasion, and I helped make her some hairpins. I’m not, however, very clear on what all happens *after* the ceremony.

“After she gets baptized, she’s going to start her apprenticeship, right? So that means that you’re going to have to come out here alone for half the week.”

My eyes go wide as Lutz explains the situation. When Tory starts her apprenticeship, then I’m going to have far less help from her when it comes to a lot of the things I do every day.

“Wh… what do I do? I hadn’t really considered this…”

Maine may be weak, but her life has been quite pleasant thanks to the fact that Tory is such a dependable older sister. If Maine needed anything, she could always bother Tory for it. Without Tory there, though, I don’t think I’ll be able to live. The blood

drains from my face as I quietly sit there and panic. Lutz, however, chuckles, scratching at his nose.

"Heh heh, well, when Tory's gone, I can help you out instead. You're still so weak!"
"Thanks, Lutz. I'm really glad for your help."
"Ah… well, I've got to go looking for firewood, so you should just stay here and rest up." He adjusts his backpack, then turns to walk away. "If you can't make it back to the city, we'll be in big trouble, you know!"

Lutz wanders off, heading deeper into the forest. After his footsteps have faded into the distance, I look around my surroundings to make sure that there's nobody around, then drop to the ground, pull out my makeshift shovel, and get ready start my excavations.

Today, my goal was to make it all the way to the forest and back without getting sick. *However!!* I've made it all the way out here, to the forest, at long last! Is it even possible for me to just go home without even trying to challenge this obstacle? Absolutely not! Dig! Dig! Dig until you can't dig any more!

I'm hoping to find some clay-like soil, but how far down am I going to have to dig to find it? Assuming the soil composition here is like it is back on Earth, I should be able to find some if I dig a fair ways down.

"Hi-YAH!"

With all of my power, I thrust my shovel deep into the soil. Unfortunately, this vaguely shovel-shaped piece of wood only manages to get about a centimeter in.

This is solid! Uh… can I even really dig here?

This feels like I'm trying to dig up the packed dirt beneath a well-used sports field. I had this image in my mind of a forest's soil being a lot more moist and loose than this. I feel a little betrayed.

Is it the really soil that's too hard, though, or is it that this shovel is terrible? …Yeah, I'm betting it's the shovel.

There is a world of difference between my concept of what a shovel should look like and *this* thing. I wanted something made out of metal, at least, not wood! Regardless,

though, it doesn't matter if the shovel's made of wood, or if the ground is too hard or too soft, abandoning this is just not an option. Even if progress is going to be slow, what choice do I have but to continue digging?

Scraping, scraping, scraping, scraping…

My wooden shovel slowly peels away the topmost layers of dirt. Unearthing my clay is going to take a lot of time, patience, and strength, and it really doesn't look like I'm going to be able to get it done in just one day. It looks like making clay tablets is going to be some serious work. I can only pray that it will be easier than my attempt to make pseudo-papyrus.

Scraping, scraping, scraping, scraping…

By the time I've gotten maybe five centimeters deep, I hear someone's footsteps approach from behind me.

"What the heck are you doing, Maine?" says Lutz as he approaches, both hands full of sticks and branches. His eyes go wide as he sees me sitting on the ground, digging with my shovel. "You promised that you were going to stay put and rest if we took you with us to the forest, right?!"

I certainly did promise that when we were leaving, but there was no way I could just sit tight when my target was finally right in front of me. I was planning on stopping before Lutz returned, but once I got started, I just couldn't quit.

…W, what do I do?

I was able to fool my father with a smile and a hug, but Lutz and Tory have specifically been appointed my guardians. I won't be able to trick them that easily. I know from experience that if I try, that would only make me look more suspicious, and they'd end up asking me even more direct questions.

"Uh, ummm… you see, Lutz," I stammer.
"…I see what?"

Lutz furrows his brow, puts his hands on his hips, and looks down at me sternly. My interrogation has begun. Well then. If I tell him the truth, he's going to get mad at me

for not thinking things through, and if I lie, then he's going to see through it and get mad at me for lying to him. Which of these options is the least damaging?

"I'm pretty sure that I told you that you need to be resting, so what the heck were you doing?" he demands.
"…Um, ummm! I was digging a hole!!"

The truth spills out of my mouth as my will crumbles under Lutz's imposing aura.

I'm actually pretty scared of him getting angry at me. I'm pretty dependent on him right now. If he storms off, I won't make it back home before the gates close.

"Yeah, I can *see* that. What are you digging for?"

Even though I'd answered honestly, Lutz seems twice as angry now. He glares at me from above, his eyes cold as ice.

"Well, um, you see… I want some *'clay'*."
"Huh? You want some what?"

Lutz cocks his head to one side, unable to understand what I'm getting at. His expression grows slightly more dubious, and seemingly slightly less angry.

"I want soil that's really dense and solid, the kind where water doesn't drain away."
"…If you wanted that, wouldn't there be a lot more of that over there, where there's not a lot of trees and grass?"

If soil has bad drainage, then it's difficult for plants to grow there. I guess it would be much more efficient to look for a place with fewer plants.

"Thanks, Lutz!" I say, immediately standing up to leave.
"Hey! Maine, wait!"

Lutz reaches out and grabs me by the scruff of my neck before I can run away. He's got both size and strength over me, so there's no way I can escape.

"Let me go, Lutz."
"Your job today is to rest, Maine. Haven't you been listening?" he says, pulling on my ears. "This isn't something you need to run out and get literally right now, right?"

“Ow, ow, ow!” Flustered, I flail my arms ineffectively as I cry out. “I don’t need it to live! I just really want it, so I wasn’t going to bother anyone to help me get it!”

Lutz lets go of my ears, and I immediately clap my hands over them, glaring up at him with teary eyes. He falters, just a little bit, although I don’t know if it’s because he can’t come up with a good rebuttal or because he’s scared of the powerful love that I show towards books despite not really being materialistic otherwise. What’s important, though, is that this is an opening that my instincts are telling me that I cannot let slip past. Now is my time to strike!

“If you make me sit still here, are you going to go dig it up yourself?!”
“…I’ve actually gathered my share of the firewood for today, so I can do that. So, Maine, sit there and be good.”

I am floored by this completely unexpected reply. My jaw drops, and I can do nothing but stare blankly up at him. He should have lashed back out at me for what I just said, but… is this guy an idiot? He surely has more important things to do than helping me work on a project that he has no interest in at all. Rather than digging up clay, shouldn’t he be gathering something?

“Lutz, um, I’m happy you want to help, but don’t you have your own things to do?”
“Maine, you’re really weak, and there’s no way you’ll be able to dig that up, so I’ll do it for you. You can pay me back by telling me what it is you need it for and what you want to do.”
“…Why, though?”
“Well, if I know what you want to do with it, then I can help you avoid doing something useless. Just now, even though you knew exactly what you wanted, you were digging in the wrong place, you know?”

Ouch, right in my weak spot.

Even though I certainly know what it is I’m after, I don’t know the words for it in this language, I don’t know what things might look like here that are different in Japan, and I don’t have the tools that I need. There are a lot of places where I can go wrong. After that explanation, I definitely understand now how useful it would be to have Lutz’s help in this project, but I still don’t actually know what his motivation is.

“Why do you want to help me like this?”

“Hm? You made me parucakes when I was super, super hungry that one time, right? I decided right then that I needed to help you out in the future.”

Huh? Just like that? That’s all it took to get him to dig up some clay for me? Wow, I shouldn’t underestimate the power of tasty food.

To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what’s going on in Lutz’s head that makes him equate pancakes to heavy labor, but as far as I’m concerned, he’s a lifesaver. Lutz offered to help of his own volition and without any reservations, so of course I’ll accept. It’s fantastic that I have someone to entrust the heavy lifting to.

“…Okay, I’ll leave it to you,” I say. “I’ll wait here.”
“Okay! I just need to finish this up real quick.”

In a flash, he gathers up his firewood and stows it away. Real quick, indeed. Then, he leads me over to where he thinks that the drainage in the soil is poor, at a somewhat low, sloping spot in the forest floor.

“Should be around here,” he says, pulling out the shovel I had brought with me. He shoves the wooden, spatula-like implement into the earth and begins to dig.

“Maine, you brought this shovel all the way out here. This digging thing isn’t just some impulse, is it. Were you even intending to keep your promise?”
“Um!? W… well, uh… ummm, I finally was able to come out here, and I just couldn’t wait any longer. So I guess I did plan this…”

His face twitching, Lutz stabs the shovel deep into the ground with all his might in a sudden outburst of emotion.

“Craaap, I wasn’t paying enough attention. You looked like you were going to be good!”
“Yeah, but… my daddy was paying even less attention.”
“Your dad’s way too soft on you!”

Lutz, fueled by his anger, tears up the earth, despite the fact that he’s using the wooden shovel I was barely able to make any progress width. Unlike the slow, steady scraping that I was doing, Lutz pounds away at the ground, gouging out chunks of the earth with every strike. This is a marvel to watch.

Is this just the strength difference? Or is it the way he’s doing it? Is there a knack to it?

“Huh? The color of the dirt is different down here?”

Lutz has excavated about fifteen centimeters down to a layer where the earth is a different color.

“Is this what you want, Maine?” he asks, holding up a small chunk of earth, which I take from him.

It’s cool to the touch, dense, and sticky, and it changes shape as I try to mold it with my fingers. There’s no mistake, this is exactly the kind of clay I was searching for.

“Yeah, this is it! Wow, Lutz, you’re so strong! This would have taken me forever to do.”
“I’m definitely not as weak as you, at least,” he says, as he continues to dig out more clay.

My eyes glitter with excitement as I start ferrying the growing pile of clay, bit by bit, over to a nearby rock. How many tablets am I going to be able to make with this, I wonder? I’m still only just thinking ahead, but I’m already starting to fall in love with these lumps of clay.

“So, what are you going to do with this?” he asks.
“Eheheh~, I’m going to make some *'clay tablets'*.”
“'Cleh tab-luts’?”
“Yeah!”

I squeeze and stretch the clay, Lutz’s effort given form, into the shape of a thin clay board. When I’ve finished stretching into shape, I pick up a thin stick from the ground, then start to write out the fairy tales that my mother back in Japan used to tell me.

I really want to be writing this in the local language if I could, but the things Otto’s been teaching me are all the high-level vocabulary that are needed for work. I can probably write out boilerplate text for a nobleman’s title or letter of introduction by now, but I still don’t know any words that are actually useful in ordinary circumstances. For now, I’ll stick to writing in Japanese.

“Maine, are those words you’re writing?”
“Yeah, they are. If I record everything in a document like this, then if I forget something in the future I can read this to remember it. Documents are amazing, you know! If I

write out enough of these like this, I can then collect them into a book, which is even more amazing."
"Ahh……"
"Lutz, thank you so much for getting me this clay! If there's something else you need to go gather, then you can go do that, okay? I'll just stay here and write."
"Got it."

The story that I'm writing right now feels like it should be titled "The Shoemaker and the Elves, Alternate Universe Edition". I try to squeeze as many characters onto each slab as I can, but in the end it takes me nearly ten tablets to finish the story.

"Alright, I did it!"

At the bottom of the page, I scribe the character for "the end", visibly trembling with excitement. I spin around, throwing my hands in the air in glee.

Clay tablets are amazing! Clay tablets are *doable*! Three cheers for the great ancient civilization of Mesopotamia!

Once I get these home, I can fire them in the stove. If they don't crack and fall apart, then they truly will be complete. I clench my writing stick tightly in my fist, then turn around to gaze upon my spread of tablets.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

In the next instant, my hands are clasped to the sides of my face, mouth gaping wide open, looking very much like that _The Scream_[2]. All of the blood drains from my face as I take in the almost unbelievable situation I see before me.

"What's wrong, Maine?" asks Fey, standing in front of me.
"Y… you stepped on them! They're all… squished!! W… waaaaaah!!"

The first half, the entire first half, of the story that I had so carefully and painstakingly written out, has been squashed completely out of shape by the bootprints of Fey and his friends. They're unrecognizable as tablets anymore, and of course the writing on them is completely illegible.

"I… I just finished that… after so much work… this!" I hiccup, barely choking back my tears. "Don't you know how much effort I've put in to finally make it out here?! I put

so! much! time! into trying to make this absurdly frail body strong enough to do this, pushed myself through all sorts of pain, and I really thought… Aaah, I even dragged Lutz and Tory into this too, and still! I finally finished this, I finally got it done, and then what?! Is there anything in that skull of yours? Is your hair pink because your brain is stuffed full of flowers?! Idiot! Idiot idiot idiot! Waaaaaaaah!!"

I break down crying in such a ridiculous emotional display that I, who is supposed to have the mental stability of an adult, should be ashamed of. I can't stop sobbing, I can't stop my tears from falling. If you put my supposed emotional maturity aside, though, this is exactly what a very distressed little girl should look like.

Having heard me scream, Tory rushes over with wide, worried eyes. She quickly asks around to figure what the current situation is, then crouches down next to me, wrapping a comforting arm around me.

"Maine, there's no need to cry like that. They didn't mean to hurt you, you know?"

It doesn't matter if they had ill intentions or not, that's not going to change the fact that my tablets have been smashed into pulp. No matter what Tory says, there's no way it can abate my resentment, my *rage*, over seeing the finished product that I had finally achieved smashed right in front of me.

"No! I'll never forgive them!"

Tears and snot stream down my face, but I lift my head to give a terrified Fey my most threatening glare. Lutz gently pats me on the back.

"You can make them again, right?" he says. "I'll help, and these guys want to make up for this so they'll help too, right?"
"Ah, yeah!" exclaims Fey. "We'll help. I'm really sorry."

Fey and his friends nod vigorously, not disagreeing with Lutz at all.

"…Okay," I say. "I'll make it again."

I was able to make these tablets once, so I'm sure that I'm on the right path. Clay tablets are far easier to make than papyrus, and I'm satisfied with the final result.

However, I make very sure to leave them with a warning.

“There will not be a second time.”

If these kids are keeping a list of people not to piss off, I’m pretty sure I just jumped to the top of it.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. Hiragana is the most basic syllabary in Japanese. It’s the first set of characters taught to students.
2. The Edvard Munch painting.

Chapter 18
Interlude: Is my daughter a potential criminal?!

My name is Gunther. I'm the lucky husband of my beautiful wife Eva and the proud father of my two adorable daughters, Tory and Maine.

Between my two daughters, Maine is the one who looks most like Eva, but she's going to be even more beautiful than her mother when she grows up. She's surely one of the gods' favorite children. Even her constant illness must be a sign of the gods' love: they adore her so much that they keep trying to call her back.

Maine's the kind of girl who gets sick the instant she works herself even a little bit too hard, but after one particularly bad fever she's started to work on pushing that limit back, bit by bit. She's been saying and doing some strange things, but lately she's been putting a lot of effort into trying to make herself stronger. She used to need to stop and catch her breath after only just going downstairs to leave our building, but over the course of the last three months she's worked so hard that now she can walk all the way to the gate without taking a single break.

She's amazing, right? My daughter's a real go-getter! Don't you agree?

On top of that, she's very, very bright… I think. I can't really say for sure, honestly. It's just that, Otto has always insisted that an assistant would only drag him down whenever I've brought the idea up to him, but when Maine came along, he got very excited and immediately asked if she could be his assistant, so she must be very smart.

According to him, she's so good at math that she was able to spot calculation errors in my squad's financial report just by looking at it, and it looks like she memorized how to write all of the words in our basic statements after just a little bit of teaching. On top of all of that, she has a very logical nature. She's always looking at her surroundings, using her powers of observation to spot tiny little changes that she can make, always thinking about how to further her goals. It seems that Otto is convinced she's absolutely exceptional.

What the hell?

I didn't understand half of what Otto was telling me, but it's easy to see that my daughter is so amazingly smart that she surprised even Otto.

That's my Maine! My amazing little girl. She truly is blessed by the gods.

Today, Maine's heading off to the forest for the first time! I'm on the day shift today, so I'll be here to meet her group when she comes back. I can't help but be worried, though.

"Sir, please calm down," says Otto.
"Hm? Ah, yeah."

She's gotten strong enough to walk to the gates, but is she really going to be able to make it all the way to the forest? If she struggles to make it, there, then she won't be able to rest inside a building like she can here. She'll be stuck outside. Earlier, I suddenly had the worst idea: what happens if her fever comes back while she's out there in the forest?

"Sir," says Otto again, "we need you to do your job. Please stop staring off into space."
"Oh."
"Are you thinking that Maine isn't going to make it?"
"Otto, you… don't say anything unnecessary!"
"Then, sir, please do your job. She'll be back in the evening, right, sir?"

I'm still annoyed that Maine actually looks up to this impertinent man and calls him "teacher". Well, I know for a fact that she respects me even more. Heh heh heh. After all, when I made her some knitting needles and helped her with the pin for Tory's hair ornaments, she declared that I was the best father in the world! She was definitely not lying.

I go about my work, my subordinates steering clear of me as I restlessly wait for Tory and her group to return. Tory has an amazing sense of responsibility, and she agreed that she'd wrap it up early today, for Maine's sake. Maine is still very weak and still slower than the other kids, so it's conceivable that they'd leave the forest in the afternoon.

The afternoon. It's obvious that they won't have come back by now. I know that.

The sun is starting to dip a little bit towards the horizon, but they still haven't come back. It should be soon, right?

The trickle of people leaving the city for the day has turned into a rush. Still no sign of her?

"Sir," says Otto, "your daughter promised that they would return early, so they're going to be back here soon, is that right? So, *please*, sir, please stop glaring at the travelers. You're scaring everyone."

The number of people entering the city to find an inn for the evening has grown, while the number of farmers leaving the city after finishing selling their grain has shrunk. Still, Tory and Maine haven't come back yet. They should be here any minute now.

They're so slow! You said you would bring everyone back early, Tory! Oh no, did Maine collapse on the way back?!

An image suddenly rushes into my mind. Maine, collapsed on the side of the road, unable to move. Tory, panicking, with no idea what to do. A feeling that I absolutely have to do something seizes hold of me.

"Otto, watch over things here…"
"Sir! Are you abandoning your post?! …O, over there! Isn't that Tory over there?!"
"Where!!"

Otto stands on tiptoes to see over the crowd. He's taller than I am, so he can see all the way back to the end of the line.

"She's right outside the gate, standing at the very end of the line with everyone else. Let's get move the line as quickly as possible, sir."
"Alright, they're here!"

I move quickly, processing the queue of people waiting to get into the city at lightning speed so that I can get Tory and her friends in as soon as I can. Unlike just a few moments ago, people flow smoothly through the checkpoint, and very soon I can see Tory in the crowd.

This certainly doesn't look like she was at the end of the line! Damn you, Otto! You tricked me!

However, I can't see Maine anywhere nearby. I can't believe that Tory, with her strong sense of responsibility, would just abandon her sister like that, but no matter how hard I look I can't see Maine anywhere.

"Tory, where's Maine?!"
"Lutz stayed behind, they're still on their way. They should be back right before the gate closes, I think."

I immediately look off into the distance, but I can't see Maine or Lutz anywhere. If they're only going to barely make it back in time for the gate to close, then they can't have left the forest early at all.

"You promised you were going to come back here early, right? Is this what you call early?"
"……"
"……"

As I scold Tory, the other kids exchange complicated expressions, as if they're debating whether they should say something or leave it to Tory. It seems like they've decided to keep it to themselves.

"Tory, what happened out—"
She interrupts me before I can finish the question. "A bunch of things. I'll tell you about it later, okay? We're late, so all our moms are going to be worried, too. I want to get everyone home as soon as possible."

Abruptly cutting the conversation short, she starts walking off. The rest of the children follow her into the city, looking incredibly worn out.

"What could have happened out there? Hey, Otto, what do you think?"
"If it was anything serious, they would have asked for help, sir."

He may be talking like nothing could have possibly happened, but if Tory just blows off my questions and can't even give me a simple answer about what happened, I'm going to have questions, you know? I'm going to get worried, you know? Maine! What in the hell happened out there!

I grow more and more restless as the day drags on. Sure enough, right before we start preparing to close the gates, Lutz finally appears, Maine leaning heavily on him, face blue.

"Maine!"
"…Daddy… sorry."

Before I can ask anything, Maine mumbles out a single word of apology, then collapses into my arms. I help Lutz get remove the wicker box (with nothing but a shovel in it) from her back, then pick her up.

"Lutz! What happened out there? Why's she apologizing?"
"Ahh… um, probably, because she made a promise that she didn't mean to keep, I guess? She suddenly started digging a big hole when I had my back turned, then she spent a bunch of time making 'cley tab-luts', then she got super mad at Fey and the others, and then got really worked up… She's probably going to be sick for three days."

Lutz rubs his temples in frustration as he tells me everything that happened. My eyes go wide with shock.

"And you didn't *stop* her?!" I snap.
He looks up at me, resentfully. "Mister, do you really think that me and Tory didn't try?"

That's right. No matter how much I want to pin the blame on him, there's no way that both Tory and Lutz didn't try to stop her. Those two have done a good job of taking care of Maine in the past. Lutz, especially, has spent the last three months helping Maine get home from the gate, and even though they're the same age he looks after her like she's his younger sister.

"Ah… no, sorry."
"Don't get mad at Tory, she really tried her best. Ah, you can probably get mad at Maine, though. I'm mad at her too. …Well," he says, looking at Maine as she lies limp in my arms, "not really, anymore."

It feels like Maine's fever is steadily starting to rise, bit by bit. Her face had been completely pale, but now it's getting redder and redder.

"Take care of Maine, okay?" he says. "I got to catch up with Fey and go home too."

“Yeah, will do. Thanks for keeping an eye on her for me.”

As Lutz runs off, I bring Maine into the night duty room and gently lay her down on the bench. Her face is bright red now, and her breathing comes in short, ragged gasps. This bench will have to be a good enough place to rest for now.

I finish up my work as quickly as I possibly can, then carry Maine all the way home.

“Welcome home, Gunther,” says Eva. “Did Maine collapse again?”

From her complete lack of surprise, it seems like she expected that this was going to happen. Swiftly, she gets Maine changed out of her outdoor clothes and gets her tucked into bed. I sit down with Tory in the kitchen, hoping to hear her side of the story.

“What happened out there today, Tory?” I ask. “I heard a little about it from Lutz, but I want you to tell me about it too.”

Tory flinches in her chair, a frightened expression on her face as she hears that I already know about what happened. For someone like Tory with such a powerful sense of responsibility, being scolded for a major mistake is one of the most terrifying things out there. To put her mind at ease, I reiterate what Lutz told me.

“Lutz told me that he didn’t want me to get angry at you. I heard that you did your best out there. He also said that I should really be getting mad at Maine, so, could you tell me what happened?”

Now that I’ve told her that I’m not mad, Tory’s look of terror starts to gradually fade away. Her eyes flicker back and forth as she tries to get the words together in her head, then she slowly opens her mouth to speak.

“To be honest, I really don’t know all that much. When we made it to the forest, Maine was about as tired as she usually is, so she sat down on a rock to take a break. Me and Lutz went off to do our gathering. I wanted to finish up quickly, so I thought that I had to hurry, and…” She trails off, worry building on her face again.
“It’s okay, I’m with you so far” I say. It’s easy enough for me to see what happened when they first arrived.
“So I thought to myself, 'it’s probably time to go soon’, but right when I was gathering everything up I heard Maine start screaming. I ran over there as fast as I could, and I

saw Maine really, really angry, so angry that she was crying. Fey and his friends apparently destroyed something that she had finally been able to make? She was so mad that I couldn't calm her down at all, and she kept saying things like 'I'll never forgive you', and… Eventually Lutz said something about helping her make everything again, and then she finally started calming down."

I close my eyes, trying to piece together Tory's messy explanation. I try to imagine what it would have looked like if I had been there with them.

…I don't get it. Maine was making *something*, and Fey broke it, so then she threw a tantrum?

"What was Maine making?"
"I don't know, exactly. I think I heard her call it a 'cley tab-lut', but… Everyone stopped to help her make them again, so that's why we were so late."

I still don't really understand what exactly happened, but I do know one thing.

"So, what you're saying is that Maine broke her promise to do nothing but rest once she got to the forest?"
"Huh… um… probably…"

Maine didn't keep her promise to sit still and arbitrarily went off to make something. That thing got broken, so she got everyone else caught up in making it again, so they spent too long out there before coming back, so she collapsed, so now her fever's back. There are limits to how much of a bother someone can be, even if they're Maine.

"I'm not going to let her go to the forest again," I say.
"What?! No! She'll be so mad!"

For some reason, Tory with me disagrees vigorously. It doesn't matter if Maine gets angry, though. *I'm* the one who should be angry, since she made a promise to me and then broke it.

"It's only fair. I can't let a girl who doesn't keep her promises go off to the forest."

I'm going to have to be very strict with her. I can't let her go out only with other kids if she's going to ignore all the rules for doing so and break the promises she makes for her parents' peace of mind. It's too dangerous.

I stand up and start heading towards the bedroom so that I can have a talk with Maine herself, but Tory grabs onto my arm and won't let go. She seems desperate to stop me. I feel bad for her, since she's just trying to look out for her little sister, but I absolutely have to have a talk with Maine.

"Dad, please! Think about it again!"
"My mind's made up. I won't let her go out there again! If she doesn't keep her promises, there's nothing else I can do."

Maine looks up at me as I enter the bedroom, although I don't know if she heard me. Her face is red with fever and her eyes are watery, but she still opens her mouth to speak, though it looks quite painful.

"…Daddy, just one more time. …I'm making *'clay tablets'*."

However, what came out of her mouth was not at all what I expected. She isn't apologizing, she isn't reflecting on what she has done, she's making demands! For some reason, she still wants to go to the forest and keep making something or other. For an instant, I lose my temper.

"What are you thinking?!" I roar. "Absolutely not!"

Maine gives a little sigh, then turns her head to look at Tory, standing next to me.

"…Hey, Tory. …I'll make them at home, so…"
"G… got it! I'll bring them home with me next time."

Wait a minute, Tory. Why are you just accepting this like it's the obvious next step?! Maine, what the hell do you think you're going to be doing in my house?! Also, are you just ignoring how angry I am?!

I spin to face Tory. "You're talking about the thing that made Maine collapse? Like hell I'll let you bring that into my house!"

As soon as the words leave my mouth, Maine's eyes narrow to slits, her expression growing unbelievably cold. Like the flip of a switch, the atmosphere in the room suddenly goes icy.

A strange shimmer of color, like the surface of an oil slick, dances across the gold of her eyes, but it must just be my imagination.

"…Are you serious, Daddy?" she says, quietly, and the incredible pressure of her words sends a shiver down my spine. I take a step back, unintentionally, shocked by the raw intimidation that my own daughter is putting out.

"Ab… absolutely serious!"
"I see…"

Maine looks away, like she's suddenly lost all interest in me.

"Well then… I'm just going to have to do to Fey what he did to my *'tablets'*, then… heh heh…"

A cruel smile spreads across her face, that strange color still shimmering in her eyes. I shiver, again. I feel like I'm drowning in this strange atmosphere, and my breath catches in my throat.

"…Maine?" I say. She starts to chuckle, a dark, terrifying sound.
Tory goes completely pale, like she's seen a monster. "Dad!" she says, shaking my arm, "just say she can go back to the forest!!"
"…Maine," I say again, "what are you thinking about?"
"Hm~mm? …Well, I was thinking of how I was going to make it so that Fey can't go to the forest either. …How, indeed?… …*'Psychological trauma'*…? …So, *'Bancho Sarayashiki'*, then…?[1] …Oh, or maybe *'The Ring'*?"

Her words are broken and nonsensical, delirious from her fever, but her head keeps moving and she keeps mumbling things out, bit by bit. I can't really hear it very well, but it almost sounds like there's a dark, gloomy echo underneath her words. It must be my imagination. Her voice must be a little cracked from the fever.

My little daughter can't be this scary.

"…Why are you talking about Fey, now?" I ask. "He doesn't have anything to do with this."
"Oh, but he does," she says, drawing in a slow, painful breath. "…But I understand what you're saying. …Truly, I understand." She nods slightly, several times.

I might have gotten a little swept away in the strangeness of the moment, but if Maine understands what I was saying, then everything's okay. She's very bright, so I'm sure she understands what she did wrong.

"Ah, okay, if you're reflecting on your actions, then—"
"*I will make them cry.* …Well, I'm going to sleep."
"Maine, wait! You didn't understand at all! Why did you just say that?!"

If she really understood me, then where the hell did "I will make them cry" come from?! Make *who* cry?! Me?! I don't understand her at all! You're nearly bringing me to tears, Maine!

"You're noisy. …Get out."
"I'm your *father*! Do not make me angrier than I already am!"

Tory pulls hard on my arm, dragging me back into the kitchen. I've been ejected from my own bedroom by my two daughters.

"Tory, that was Maine in there, right?"
"I think that was Angriest Maine. Her eyes were sparkling kind of weirdly. When Fey broke her 'cley tab-luts', she got so mad that she started crying, and the same thing happened. Everyone said it was really scary."

Ahh, if even I got a little bit scared after that, it must have been absolutely terrifying for those kids.

"She only started to cheer up when we were helping her fix things, so when it was time to go, I couldn't make myself say it…"
"I see."

If she was putting out that much pressure, I don't blame her. Right now, even I really just want to leave her alone.

“When it looked like we’d just barely make it back to the gates before they closed, I begged her to go. Lutz helped, and when he said we’d definitely finish it next time, we finally got her to stop working. Then everyone promised to help her finish it next time, and she said that she’d come back with us.”
“……”

I understand now what Tory was getting at when she tried to stop me just a little while ago. If she had only managed to calm Maine down by telling her that they’d finish up next time, then of course she wouldn’t want me to go in there and tell her that she can never go back.

“Dad, can you let her go just one more time? I think that Fey and the others are really scared of what’s going to happen if she gets mad again. Didn’t she say that she was going to do to Fey what he did to her 'cley tab-luts’?”
“What happened to those, anyway?”

I still don’t understand what a 'cley tab-lut’ is. What the hell kind of thing *is* it?

“Fey and his friends stepped on them and squashed them, so what’s she going to do to them? Is she going to trample them flat?! She said she was going to make sure they couldn’t go to the forest again either, what did that mean? She said she was absolutely going to make them cry! What is she going to do? What is *Fey* going to do?!”

The blood drains from my face as I listen to Tory. Hearing everything Maine had said again is only making me more scared. I wonder, no, I *need to know* what Maine is planning to do. Is… is my daughter about to start committing crimes?

“Tory, what can we do to stop her?”
“I don’t know. Try asking Lutz. He was the one who got her to calm down when we were in the forest.”

The next day, I pull Lutz to the side as he passes through the gates on his way to the forest and ask him what Maine could have meant. Tory was probably just scared and blew things out of proportion, it’s probably not actually that big of a deal, right?

However, Lutz smashes my tiny bit of hope with a cheerful answer.

“A~ah,” he says, in a light tone of voice, “she got super mad at Fey and the others, after all. You absolutely can’t stop her when her eyes get like that, you know.”
“Uh?”
“If she finds even the tiniest chance, she latches onto it like a magic beast. She’ll get whatever she wants to get done, done. She’s the kind of girl who absolutely finishes her goals. No matter what she has to do, no matter how long it takes.”

His eyes glimmer with pride and his chest is puffed up, and he talks like he’s enthusing about how awesome Maine is. But, wait a bit, think about this for a second. If a person like that decided that they wanted to *hurt* someone, that would make them a supremely dangerous individual, right? And why is Lutz acting so proud of her? She’s *my* daughter, you know?

“Like, say, these 'cley tab-luts’. She wanted to go to the forest, so she spent *three whole months* getting strong enough to get there. She said all of that was so she could make those 'cley tab-lut’ things. So, I think that she’s definitely the kind of person who’ll never give up on what they’ve set their mind to.”
“…Those 'cley tab-luts’ were that important to her, huh…”

I had no idea that she’d put that much effort into making those things. It looks like it’s not such a simple thing to just ban her from finishing them. Just when I decide that I should probably talk to her about it again, Lutz drops another bombshell.

“A~ah, you know, after she finally made her 'cley tab-luts’ only to see them smashed in front of her, and then running out of time before she could finish remaking them, and then getting sick and collapsing on her way back, and *then* being told that she can’t go back to the forest and that she can’t have any clay in the house either… She’s going to blame it all on Fey, for stepping on them in the first place. I really hope they come out of this alive.”
“Don’t say something so terrifying! Are you saying I’ve raised a criminal?!”

She said she was going to make them cry, not kill them. It’s okay!! …At least, that’s what I want to tell myself.

“Eh? Well, maybe you really did, Mister Gunther?”
“Huh? I did?”

“Well, you banned her from going to the forest and making her 'cley tab-luts’, right? Me, I’m terrified of what might happen if she goes at it with all of her might. I wouldn’t dare try to help or hinder her, and I’d never, ever tell her she couldn’t do something.”
“Terrified?”

I blink my eyes repeatedly, trying to process what he’s telling me. No matter how I look at it, Maine is only six years old, though she’s so little she looks like she’s three or four. She’s sickly, frail, short, weak, and slow. I can’t help but think that Maine using all of her strength to do something isn’t actually all that much of a problem. Lutz, though, shrugs his shoulders, continuing to describe why he thinks she’s so scary.

“Because, you know, Maine thinks differently than I do. I don’t know what she’s going to do, where, or how. She might be so weak that I wouldn’t take her seriously if she came at me with a weapon, but that’s not something she’d ever do. I don’t know how, but she’d find and attack their weak points directly, and that’s really terrifying.”

I groan to myself. Lutz is being completely serious here. I hadn’t really thought that what Maine meant by all of her might might have been different than what Lutz or I would mean. I’m scared that I don’t even know how serious she’s going to be. That lack of understanding alone is terrifying.

“A while ago, she even beat my big brother Zeke, like to the point where he was seriously begging her to stop. She told me that strength isn’t everything, and lately, I’ve been beating my big brothers too, sometimes.”

Wait a minute! This is the first I’m hearing about this! How could she possibly beat Zeke? And we’re talking about beating as in “winning”, right?! What has my daughter been *doing*?!

“Hey, Lutz,” I say. “This is a completely honest question: how would you stop Maine from being so angry, if you were in my shoes?”
“Hmmm, I think that I’d find a lot of clay and pile it up in front of her. She seems absolutely fixated on nothing but her 'cley tab-luts’.”

Now that Lutz has described the situation to me, I know what I have to do. In order to preserve the safety of this town and keep my youngest daughter from a life of crime, I’m going to, begrudgingly, have to let her go back to the forest.

When I tell her this, though, she looks very dissatisfied, puffing out her cheeks in frustration.

"…And I'd come up with all of these really good plaaans… and it would be a waste to just let them go, right?"
"Not at all!! Throw whatever schemes you're plotting out of your head right this very instant!"
"Tsk…"

It seems like she dreamed up some sort of plans to squash Fey flat while caught in her feverish nightmares. I don't know if it's because she's a little too smart, or just far too angry, but I feel like this was a very close call.

For now, I've stopped Maine from committing any crimes. Fey and the others won't have to face her wrath, and I've protected the peace of this town. I'm very, truly grateful that Lutz told me how I could calm her down.

I breathe a sigh of relief, having put everything back in order, then suddenly gasp as I come to a realization.

Huh? Didn't all this start because she needed to think twice about breaking promises?

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. A Japanese ghost story about broken promises.

Chapter 19
Clay Tablets: Also no good

While wracked by feverish nightmare, I dreamed up ways to bury Fey and his lackeys in the icy grip of terror.

I was *so close*! I was so close to finally having a book! But, if I can't go to the forest, and if I can't have any clay brought back to me, then I'll never get my book.

It would seem that this calls for the most traumatic of ideas: classic Japanese horror. I have no solid idea about what the denizens of this world are truly afraid of, but if I let my hair hang down in front of my face like Sadako[1], wear a stained, tattered dress, and stumble towards them while whispering dark curses… or maybe I could count my missing clay tablets like Okiku from *Bancho Sarayashiki*…[2] How about that? That's scary, right?

Even though I had come up with so many good ideas, by the time my fever went down, my father had changed his mind. When I'm finally healthy enough to get out of bed, he tells me that he's lifted the ban on my going to the forest.

"…Tomorrow," he says, with a complicated expression on his face.
"Hm?" I reply, looking up at him.
"You can go back to the forest tomorrow."
"Huh? I can? Why?"
"…You don't seem happy."

I actually really am happy that I can go back to the forest, but this means all of my Japanese horror plans are for naught. I'd been practicing mumbling curses, thinking about how to make my clothes look properly ghastly, and coming up with the perfect times and places to really set the stage for the whole spectacle. I could have stood on the edge of the well, or I could have shuffled out of a dark alleyway…

"I mean, I'm happy, but…"
"But, what?"
"…And I'd come up with all of these really good plaaans… and it would be a waste to just let them go, right?"

“Not at all!! Throw whatever schemes you’re plotting out of your head right this very instant!”
“Tsk…“

Well, if I can go to the forest and finish working on my tablets, then my plans aren’t really necessary. In fact, it would ultimately be more wasteful to actually go through with them. I no longer have the free time to play around with Fey and the others, so it’s obvious that those plans are just going to be automatically discarded.

Nevertheless, what on earth happened to make him change his mind so suddenly?

"I’ve been keeping an eye on how you’re doing, and I think you can go tomorrow. But no sooner!”

It seems that he didn’t want me to go because suddenly taking off for the forest while I was still convalescing would have been a terrible idea. I already knew that, though. Nobody in the world knows better than me what a pile of junk this body is.

Today, my fever went down *and* I was given permission to go back to the forest. My heart dances with joy as I work on preparing everything I’ll need for tomorrow. In the storage room, I find some sort of board that I might be able to use as a writing desk, and put it in my basket. (What that board is *supposed* to be used for, I don’t know.) Then, I grab the entire pile of old rags that my mother uses as cleaning cloths and stuff them in there too. I’ll use those to wrap my tablets in for transport on the way home.

Clay tablets! Clay tablets clay tablets clay tablets I’m coming for yooou!!

The next day, I wake up energized and excited, only to be greeted by heavy rain. Not just any heavy rain, even, but a torrential, record-breaking downpour, a storm so fierce that it’s practically a typhoon. Even though the shutters on our window are closed, I can still hear the howling of the wind and the pounding of the rain.

“Noooooooo!! Rain?!”

In a world without weather forecasts, thinking about the weather had never even occurred to me. There’s been many times where I haven’t been able to go outside because my fever was too high or because my family didn’t say it was okay, but until now I was never kept indoors by bad weather.

Visions flash through my head of my tablets, pounded by the rain until they're nothing but mud. Even though I had hidden them from the elements under some bushes, that's nowhere close to being adequate protection against a typhoon like this.

Ngyaaaaah! My tablets…! They're turning to droopy mush!!

"Hey, Maine, wait!" yells my mother as I immediately, unthinkingly, dash for the door. She grabs both of my arms and holds them behind me, stopping me in place. "Where do you think you're going?!"
"The forest!" I yell, struggling against her grip.
"Even on the best of days you get fevers far too quickly, so why would you think that going outside in the middle of a storm like this is a good idea?!"

The sound of the wind and the rain pounding ceaselessly at the wooden door reverberates through the house. Just from the noise, it's obvious that this is an extremely violent storm. An ordinary person would hesitate before trying to go out in this, even if it's just to the well, so there's no chance in hell that I'll be able to make it outside at all. Heartbroken, I sit down abruptly, like a puppet with its strings cut.

"My *'clay tablets'*… waaah!"
"It's okay, Maine," says Tory, coming over to comfort me. "Everyone said that they're going to help you this time, so it'll be even quicker and easier than before to make them."

She gently strokes my head as she reassures me that everything's going to be okay. She really is an *amazing* older sister.

The storm is so unusually bad that it lasts for two full days before clearing up, so it isn't until after that that the children got permission to go back out to the forest.

The morning sun shines brightly down from an astoundingly clear sky, and the faces of all of these children that can finally go to the forest shine brightly as well. Today, the apprentices aren't working, so a lot of the bigger kids have joined us as well. We have far more people coming with us today than usual. Ralph, one of Lutz's older brothers, is joining us today. He has an enormous basket strapped on his back, and a bow and a quiver full of arrows hanging at his side.

"Hey, Maine!" he says, cheerfully. "Is your fever doing any better?"

“Good morning, Ralph,” I reply. “I got better a little while ago, but as soon as my dad said I was okay to go that awful storm hit.”
“That really is awful,” he says.

He ruffles my hair, then turns to Tory.

“Hey, Tory,” he says.
“Ralph! It’s been a while,” she replies.

Ralph, looking remarkably more reliable than he did before, maybe because he’s been working on his apprenticeship.
Tory, whom I have been carefully polishing in preparation for her baptism, and her radiant smile.

Hey, hey. Don’t these two look really good together? They’re both really good at taking care of people too, they’re a great match.

As I leer at the two of them, Lutz grabs my arm and starts yanking me forward.

“Whoa?!”
“Maine, stop staring off into space. You’re the slowest person here, so you’ve got to be in front when we leave, okay?”
“Oh! Sorry.”

I join the mass of children, and we all start walking towards the forest. As we pass through the gate, the green, open fields stretch out before us. The scars left by the storm can be seen here and there, where a few of the fields of crops have been torn to shreds.

Come to think of it, does this world have anything like disaster relief?

I stare blankly off into the distance, my feet moving mechanically beneath me. Lutz sticks his hand in front of my face and waves it back and forth.

“Eh?” I say, blinking. “What’s up?”
“Oh, I just was wondering if you were actually watching where you were going. Hey, Maine, you’re going to try making those things again, today? Those 'cley tab-luts’? What are those, anyway?”

Lutz can't read, so he couldn't have any idea what I've been trying to write down, even if I wasn't writing in Japanese. More importantly, though, he's been living a life without written words or even paper at all in his house. He absolutely has no idea about the amazing wonders of permanent media like clay tablets.

I suddenly feel a strange sense of purpose; a desire to proselytize, to spread the good word of the written word.

"Well, so," I begin, "it's a thing that I can use to write down things that I don't want to forget. If you carefully write everything down, you'll never forget it, you know, because since you've written it down you can always go back and look at it again, right? *'Media'* exist for that reason, and my *'clay tablets'* are one kind of *'medium'*. Since it's made out of clay, and since you can knead and mold clay, if you make a mistake when writing, you can use your finger to smooth it out again and start over. You can bake it when you're done, if you want it to last forever. It's amazing, right?"

I don't know if it's because of the eloquence of my explanation, but Lutz has his mouth hanging open, head tilted to one side.

"…I don't get it. …Anyway, what are you trying to write?"
"A story, I'm writing a story. It's one that Mommy told me, so I want to write it down so that I don't forget it, you know? What I really want are books, but I can't get any of those here, so I'm making my own."
"Ahhh, so is that what you've been trying to do?"

Lutz's question suddenly makes me think. Right now, I don't have even a single book available to me, so I decided that I needed to somehow make my own. What I really, truly want, though, is not making books.

"Nuh-uh, it's a little different. What I *really* want is to live a life where I'm surrounded by books. No matter many books are written every month, I want to have all of them, and I want to be able to grow old spending all of my time reading."
"Ummm, so… you want books…?"
"Yes!! I want them very badly, and I want them right now. But they're so expensive that I can't buy them, so they're way out of my reach. I've got no choice but to make them myself, right? Paper is too expensive to buy, so my plan is to make clay tablets, write a story, and then bake it so that I can have it forever."

At this point, Lutz claps his hands together, and a moment of understanding flashes across his face.

“So, what you’re doing is making a substitute for a book?”
“Yeah! I’ve failed a lot of times so far, so this time I’m absolutely going to make this a big success.”
“Ah! Okay, I’ll help out too.”

For whatever reason, Lutz has become so cooperative because I had some ideas about cooking. I kind of want to help him out a little, too.

“So, Lutz, what do you want to do? You’ve heard what I want to do, but do you have anything that you really want to do?”
“I… hmm! I want to try going to other towns. If I become a trader or a minstrel, then I could go a lot of places, and hear a lot of stories, right? There’s a lot out there I want to see.”
“That sounds nice…”

Come to think of it, back in Japan, I also used to dream of spending my life traveling to the great libraries of foreign countries and reading all of their books. As visions of my unfulfilled dreams unfold in my head, my gaze drifts off into the distance.

“…You really think so?” he asks. “About wanting to leave this town?”
“A~ah, traveling is good too! Traveling around, going here and there, that sounds fun. I always used to dream about traveling, visiting all sorts of *'libraries'* all over *'the world'*…”
“Ah, I was worried you’d think I was being ridiculous. …If it’s something you want to do, Maine, I’m sure you’re going to make it happen.”
“You too, Lutz. I think you can do it if you try.”

My mind is so crammed full of the countless dreams I had back when I was Urano that I’m far too preoccupied to notice whatever expression Lutz is wearing on his face right now.

By the time we arrive at the forest, the packed dirt of the road has almost finally dried. We quickly pick a large clearing on the edge of the forest as a good meeting spot.

“Okay, let’s get started gathering,” says one of the older children. “Little kids, don’t go too far from here. Make sure you can always see this clearing, okay?”

The older kids take out their bows and arrows, and take off deeper in the forest. The younger kids hesitate, glancing nervously at me. I may be exhausted just from walking all the way here, but I immediately start looking around the area, worried about the state of my clay tablets.

“Hey, does anyone remember where we put my *'clay tablets'*?”

I can’t find the tree we put a mark on the last time we were here. It’s already been quite a few days since I was here last, so I’ve already forgotten, but everyone’s looking around restlessly, troubled looks on their faces.

“We marked a tree somewhere over there, right?” says Fey, pointing off into a distance. Immediately, all of his lackeys start nodding. I had a hunch that that direction was where we needed to be looking, but the storm had knocked down so many trees that it was hard to be sure.

“That’s about where it was, so I guess we just need to start looking around there,” says Lutz, bending town to start looking through some of the bushes. Everyone else starts bustling about together, searching here and there.

It’s not just Fey and his lackeys, *everyone* is helping search… wow, these are all some really good kids, aren’t they?

“Hey,” says Fey, squatting down low beside a bush. “Isn’t this it?”

Our landmark had been broken apart, so it had been difficult to find, but Fey waves his hand at me, beckoning me over. I rush over with every scrap of speed I can muster to take a look. All I see is a misshapen lump of earth, with vague hints of ruined, illegible characters. Just as I expected, it’s all soggy and muddy, and you can’t really even make out that there were words carved into them at all. My tablets have returned to being just lumps of clay.

Ah… back to square one again…

“It… it wasn’t my fault this time! I found them like this!” exclaims Fey, hurriedly.
“…Yeah,” I reply, though it’s obvious what happened even if he didn’t say anything.

I know that it's not his fault. I know that everyone around me is asking what's going on or wondering what they should do. I know that this is something that I had known was going to happen. Still, I can't stop the tears streaming down my face.

As tiny sobs leak out of me despite my better efforts, I hear footsteps come up behind me. They come up right beside me, and a hand is placed lightly on my head.

"Maine," says Lutz, "if you've got enough time to cry about it, you should use that to make some new ones instead."

His words snap me back to reality. That's right, it's just like he says. I'm finally back out here, with Fey and his friends here to help me rebuild them. I sniff, wiping the snot from my nose off with my sleeve, and lift my head.

As if I'd give up here!

My first defeat was under the boots of Fey and his disastrous lackeys. My second defeat was at the hands of time, cutting me off with the closing of the gates. My third defeat was by the howling storm.

I have fought through man-made calamity and natural disaster! There can't possibly be anything left that can stop me now. I am going to complete these tablets at any cost.

It may be the case that my clay has turned into a shapeless blob, but I can knead and mold it back into flat tablets again. If I don't have enough, then I remember where I can go to get more. This isn't square one. Square one was when I was scratching at the dirt with my blunted wooden shovel, fruitlessly searching for clay in the wrong spot. This is way different.

Everything's going to be fine.

What I've learned from my mistakes so far is that I either need to finish these in a single day while the weather is still clear, or relocate to someplace with a roof, otherwise this whole thing is futile. We've been blessed by beautiful skies today, and I have three strong, healthy helpers on top of Lutz and Fey to assist me. Whether it's because my tears and rage were effective at guilting them into helping, or whether they're just really eager, I don't know. Either way, with even more people helping me out then there were before, it's definitely going to take far less time to finish.

“It’s okay, Tory,” I say, “you can go work on gathering. I’ve got Lutz, Fey, and the others helping me.”
“Got it. …Good luck, everyone!”
“Yeah!”

Tory’s encouragement helps me pull myself back together, and I get started on once again remaking my clay tablets. Fey and one of his lackeys work on digging out more clay from the ground, then the other two lackeys work with Lutz to knead the clay and form it into the right shape for me. As for me, I’ve found a slender twig and am carefully carving my story into the surface of the first tablet.

Yeah, yeah! I’m feeling great about this!

“I’m going to need about ten *'clay tablets'* to finish writing my story,” I say, “so once you’ve made ten of them, go do your gathering work. Thanks!”
“O… okay!”

One after another, clay tablets are quickly dug up, molded, and lined up next to me. After swiftly finishing ten of them, Fey and the others don’t hesitate to race off into the forest.

Lutz, however, stays behind, and starts digging up more clay.

“Lutz, you’re not going with them?”
“Ralph’s here today, so I’m going to stay here and help you!”
“Hmm! Well, I’ve already got enough clay, so do you want to practice writing?”

On a patch of dirt still soft from the rain, I use my stick to write out “Lutz” in the local alphabet.

“What’s that?” he asks.
“That’s your name! If you can’t even write your own name, you won’t be able to go visit other towns, you know?”

Our town basically allows us to walk freely in and out of the gates because they know who we are, but if we try to go to other towns, they’ll ask us for our names and want them written down. That’s what Otto, a former trader, told me. At our gates, the entry lines for people from other towns are actually separate from those for people from

our town, and the checks are much more strict for outsiders. If Lutz wants to travel to other towns someday, he should at least know how to write his own name.

"So, this is how you write my name?"
"Yeah! You know, if you want to travel around, it's a really good idea to learn how to write."

His eyes gleaming, Lutz practices writing his name on the ground over and over. Meanwhile, I continue diligently working on finishing my clay tablets. Carefully, I carve the first story I ever heard in this world into the tablets, in Japanese. With every stroke of my stick, I tell myself that I'm absolutely going to finish my book.

"It's done!!"

I've finished writing out one of the fairy tales my mother told me. Right now, I want to write an anthology, titled something like "Tales My Mother Told Me", filled with all of the bedtime stories that my mother packed into my head ever since I was reborn into this world.

I carefully wrap each of my tablets in the old rags I brought with me. I stack them in my basket, taking great care to move them as slowly as possible so that I didn't risk smudging the words written on them into illegibility.

When I finally have all of them stacked neatly in my basket, I heave an enormous sigh. My eyes grow hot, and tears shimmer on their surface.

This is my first real triumph! To be honest, clay tablets aren't the kind of medium that most people would think of when they're talking about books, but, no matter what *anyone* says, this is the first book I've finally acquired in this new world.

It was at the end of autumn that I was reborn into this world, and now we're approaching the end of spring. It has taken a tremendous amount of time, but I have finally acquired my first book.

"Even in a world like this, I can still read a book," I whisper to myself. "…So, everything's going to be okay."

I was reborn into a world where books are far too expensive for poor people to buy, into the body of a child that can hardly do anything without being stricken with fever.

I was fine with doing something reckless, and maybe even dying for it. I'd never once imagined that I'd have the body of such a frail little girl. I'd never even considered that I'd be forced to live out my life in a world without books. I didn't even have a fragment of attachment to this new life.

However, I finally have a book in my grasp. I've finally accomplished the one thing that I truly wanted to do. Now, I have something to live for. Now, I can truly see myself living in this world.

"Maine, you finished it?" asks Tory, returning to the clearing with her pack full.
"Yeah! I'm finished. Thanks to you, and Lutz."

The emotions I'm feeling for Tory and Lutz may be those that Maine felt for them, and not mine, but making this book has truly saved me.

I carefully lift the topmost cloth and show the two of them the finished tablet.

"Hey, Maine," asks Tory, "What did you write on this one?"
"Oh, this is the story of the children from the stars. It's the story that Mommy told me on my first night."
"…Your first night?" she asks, a dubious frown on her face.
"Yeah, this is the first story I can remember."

This is the story that my mother quietly recited to me on that first night, when my fever was so painfully high that I couldn't sleep. Her voice may have been full of love and affection, but it was an affection for someone who was not *me*. Her words and emotions were things I couldn't accept, so they passed right through me, and the feelings of isolation within my disconnected mind only grew deeper.

Despite this, as soon as I decided that I was going to make a book in this world, I immediately knew what it was going to be about. If I capture her bedtime stories in my precious, first book, then I feel like I might truly be able to accept her love.

"I don't want to forget her story at all, so I made sure to write all of it out here so that it'll never go away."
Tory smiles, seeming a little bit anxious. "But, it can still be erased, right?"
"If I leave them like this, yeah, but when I bake them, they'll get hard, and then you can't erase them anymore. Then, once I do that, I can always read Mommy's stories."

It's been almost half a year since I started living here, but this is the first time I've ever had an honest, genuine smile.

…This would be an excellent happy note to end my story on, but it does not, of course, end here.

As soon as I returned home, I baked my tablets in our oven. They exploded. No, really. They exploded. I don't know what you're trying to tell me, but I'm not lying.

While they were baking in the oven, there was a boom, and the first book I had ever written flew out of the oven in a cloud of dust and chunks of dirt.

I didn't even have the time to investigate why. First, I was too dumbfounded to ask, then my mother scolded me for quite some time, then she made me promise that I wasn't going to do anything like that again.

Huh? Doesn't this mean that I'm actually, completely back to square one now? Ah, wait, no, it still feels like I actually finished something, so… three steps forward, two steps back, maybe?

…What the hell do I try next?

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. The specter from The Ring.
2. A classic Japanese ghost story. Okiku, the vengeful spirit in the story, is obsessed with finding the missing plate from her collection, which was lost and/or broken through treachery.

Chapter 20
Tory's Baptismal Ceremony

Ahh… if only I could have successfully baked my clay tablets. That would have been great. I never even imagined that they might explode.

If I had a knife like Tory's, then at least I might be able to make *mokkan*.[1]

After that tiny little explosion in the stove, I was forever banned from trying to make clay tablets again. I'd completely run out of book-making plans, so I was only left to ponder what my next method could possibly be. In the meantime, Tory turned seven years old.

Here, it's customary for your seventh birthday to be an enormous celebration. More accurately, it's not the precise birthday that's being celebrated, but instead the season in which you were born. Every season, there is a large baptismal ceremony at the temple, where every child who has turned seven gather to be baptized. Afterwards, the children are able to start working as apprentices, and it seems like that's when they start getting counted as part of the town's population.

For whatever reason, it makes me feel kind of weird to think about religious ceremonies, but if I think of it like "Shichi-Go-San"[2], then it doesn't bother me at all. Strange.

Children under the age of seven aren't allowed to enter the temple, so my father and I aren't participating. Incidentally, while I already knew for a while that I wasn't going to be able to attend, my father's absence was forced on him abruptly. Due to some twist of unfortunate luck, he has been summoned for a meeting that he absolutely cannot get out of, on the very day of his oldest child's baptism. On top of that, this is a meeting convened by some very high-ranking members of the aristocracy, so if he didn't attend, his superiors might have his head. *Literally*.

Scary!

Despite that, my father has been sitting here since early morning, issuing complaint after complaint, seemingly in no hurry to actually head out for work.

“No… I don’t want to go to this stupid meeting! It’s Tory’s baptism, you know? Why’d someone have to schedule this pointless meeting on this really important day?”

It’s very true that today is an important day. I’m sure that aristocrats have children too, so if they also go to get baptized then they should have been well aware of exactly when the ceremony is supposed to take place.

“Huh?” I say, puzzled. “Do the nobles not baptize their kids like we do?”
“…They don’t go to the temple to do it, they call the priests out to their houses. So, they don’t understand how we feel in the lower classes.”

Last night, I was able to ignore him, since I figured it was better for him to get his complaints off his chest while he was still at home, but this man is *obstinate*. Perhaps it’s a trait common to fathers in every world who love their daughters that they feel this anguished and depressed whenever they miss their daughter’s track meet or recital?

I sigh as I carefully comb Tory’s long hair out to the sides. “Daddy, we can all go out together, so you need to get ready to go to work! You can walk Tory to the temple, you know. Anyway, only the kids can enter the temple today, so you’d just be waiting in the courtyard, right?”

I think he’ll cheer up a little bit if he can lead Tory to the temple and see her standing in line, all dressed up in her beautiful new clothes. Even though I’ve offered him a good suggestion, he still continues to ramble meaninglessly.

“But it’s a father’s duty to wait in the courtyard…”
“I thought it was a father’s duty to go to work for their family, though?”
“Ngh!”
“Is going to work with me really so awful? You’re going to go alone, then!”

I push him away, acting like I’ve lost all ability to care. He turns to me with pleading eyes brimming with tears, seemingly about to start crying at any moment.

“…No, I’ll go with you. As soon as the meeting’s over, we’ll come back, because everyone’s going to be celebrating tonight…”

Tory looks over at our father and smiles brilliantly, keeping her head as still as she can so that I can continue weaving her hair.

“Hey, Dad. I get it, already! You’re going to come back and celebrate with us, right? I’m really looking forward to it, so come back soon, okay?”
“…Yeah!”

With a single sweet smile, my father’s mood suddenly skyrockets. I mentally applaud Tory’s results. You truly are our angel, Tory.

“Maine,” she says, “keep an eye on Dad to make sure he gets his work done today.”
“Leave it to me! I’ll do my best, so you don’t need to worry about that all on your baptism day!”
“Hey, Maine!” objects my father. Tory starts laughing out loud.

Yeah, that’s a great smile. It seems like Tory won’t be lonely, even if our father can’t come to her baptism ceremony, since she’s so appreciative of our father’s oppressive love.

“All done,” I say. “…Yeah, Tory, you’re super cute.”
“Thanks, Maine.”

I’ve combed her hair out, separating it to either side, then braided some of the hair on each side back into a half-up style, which I then finished off with her hairpin. The hairpin is something that I made this past winter, using the same colors of thread that were used in the embroidery on Tory’s dress to make a bouquet of tiny lace flowers. The multicolored flowers on the pins match Tory perfectly, giving her a cheerful yet sweet sort of air.

“Well, Tory,” says my mother as she walks into the room, “You’re looking very beautiful.”
“Huh… Mom?”

My mother has dressed up for today, since she’ll be going to the temple with Tory. She’s wearing her only nice dress, a simple, pale-blue affair whose hem falls all the way down to her ankles, just barely letting you see her shoes. I never thought that she could become so beautiful just by changing her clothes and scrubbing away the red stains from crushing seeds at the dyery.

My mother’s got some raw potential underneath all that. She’s seriously beautiful.

“Mommy, come sit over here,” I say.
“I’m fine as I am,” she replies. “The way you do up hair is very beautiful, Maine, but also very extravagant. I don’t want to draw any attention to myself today; it’s the children who should be playing the leading roles.”
“Ahh, okay.”

It’s not like I can really use any ornaments, so I personally wouldn’t think that my hairstyling is particularly extravagant, but if my mother says so I guess it must be true. I don’t really know what counts as dressing up around here, but it’s definitely possible that I could overdo it.

I hop down from the chair I’d been standing on as I worked on Tory’s hair. “So, let’s go!”

I grab my tote bag with the things I’ll need to take with me to the gate, then head out the door with my dressed-up sister. My mother, Tory’s chaperone for the day, follows close behind, accompanied by my father, dressed in his work clothes.

Typically, my mother walks at a very brisk pace, even when carrying a lot of things, but today she steadily, carefully climbs down the stairway, holding the hem of her dress up so that it doesn’t drag as she walks. Tory hitches up her skirt a little bit as well, mimicking our mother, taking the stairway one steady step at a time. Since I’m in my usual clothing, I don’t care at all, and I actually manage to make it to the bottom of the stairs a step ahead of everyone else.

“Whoa…”

A great many people are milling about outside in the plaza around the water well. It seems like everyone’s showing up to congratulate the children who are heading off to their baptisms. I can see Ralph and Lutz in the crowd, despite the fact that I’m pretty sure they have nothing to do with today’s ceremony. Everyone seems to be here to give their well wishes to today’s stars.

I’m sure there were still ceremonies in the winter and the spring, but back then I really didn’t have much strength to leave the house very often, so this is the first time I’m seeing all of this first-hand.

“Fey, congratulations,”
“You’re looking pretty manly!”

It seems like pink-haired Fey is having his baptism today as well. Similar to Tory, he's wearing a white outfit with an embroidered sash. His sash is green, though, and looped around his shoulder.

…Ah, I see. Being able to sew really is important.

Since everything around here is hand-made, relative differences in your skills can have a very noticeable effect. In Japan, being good at sewing was really never particularly useful, and everyone here always wears beat-up rags, so even though my mother had told me that being good at sewing was an important skill for a beautiful woman to have, it never really clicked with me until now.

I didn't have anything to compare my mother's sewing skill to, but now that I'm seeing the other kids' clothes, she really is amazing at it. Enough to brag about it, even. As for me, it's becoming clear that it won't be at all possible for me to find a lover, let alone get married.

"Ahh, Tory! You're amazingly cute!" cries Carla, her voice booming through the plaza and her hands clapped to the sides of her face as she praises Tory. Everyone's attention is immediately drawn to Tory, and they start heaping congratulations on her.

"Congratulations, Tory!"
"Your hair is so beautiful, just like a nobleman's daughter!"

Carla continues to lavish praise on Tory, who gives her an embarrassed smile in return. Unlike all of the other children, Tory's hair cuticles are very healthy, so her blue-green hair is glossy. Between the white dress my mother is so proud of and the halo of light reflecting off of her hair, she looks positively angelic.

My Tory really is an angel. I think I can understand why my dad dotes on her so much.

"Maine worked really hard to braid my hair," she says.
"Huh, she did?" asks Carla. "I guess she has another redeeming feature beyond her unusual recipe ideas."

Carla, you're so mean. I breathe a sigh of relief, though: there's at least one thing that this worlds think that I'm good for.

“This is really complicated. How did you do it up like that?”
“Let me see, let me see!”

Regardless of age, an army of women has formed around us, trying to get a good look at Tory’s head.

Eeeek! This is a really standard hairdo, you don’t need to stare so closely! You people don’t comb your hair our properly, so of course it gets messy when you try to braid it…

“That looks great, Tory!” says one of the younger girls in the crowd, sighing enviously. “I want to do my hair like yours for my baptism this winter.” The crowd around her agrees emphatically, murmuring “me too, me too” in unending waves of sycophancy.

“So everyone wants to Maine to do their hair too?” asks Tory with a delighted smile. She turns to me. “Will you?” I immediately shake my head in refusal. “There’s no way!”
“Why not?” she says, taken aback a little.
“I don’t know when my fever’s going to come up again. You know that this is the first time I could actually go to a baptism, right?”

I feel a little bad for Tory, since all she wanted to do was brag about her little sister, but there’s no way I could braid the hair of a bunch of unknown girls every single time a baptismal ceremony came around. On top of that, I can guarantee that it won’t turn out even close to how Tory’s looks right now. These girls’ hair is like Tory’s was at the start of all this; rough, unwashed, and in dire need of repair. While I had to touch damaged hair like that when I was just starting out, by now I absolutely do not want to have to feel anything like that again.

“Ah, okay. You’ve been doing a little better lately, but your fever really does still come back unexpectedly. I was just trying to boast a little about my little sister, that’s all.”

I’m trying to give off the impression that I really want to agree to Tory’s offer despite the fact that I’m such a fundamentally useless burden. Honestly, though, doing that would be psychologically impossible for me.

“…I can still show everyone else how to do their hair like I did yours. I just don’t want to promise everyone that I’ll do it for them, that’s all.”

“Yeah, yeah, like Dad was just telling you the other day, don’t make promises you can’t keep. Hey everyone, Maine said that she can show everyone how to do their hair like mine!”

Tory seems satisfied with the compromise I came up with for her suggestion, so it seems that the plaza in front of the water well is going to become a hairdressing classroom at some point in the future.

I never would have thought, even for a second, that braided hair could draw this much attention. No wonder my mother didn’t want me to do hers as well.

“Hey,” says one of the girls, “what about that hairpin? Who made that?”
“Maine!” replies Tory. “Nuh-uh,” I say, “the whole family did! Me and Mommy made the flowers, and Daddy made the pin part of it.”
“Ahh, that’s right,” she says.

My mother, who is very skilled at sewing, didn’t know about lacework. It seems that it really is very rare to see it here. All of the older woman immediately pounce on me.

“Hey, Maine. Do you think you could teach me how to do that?”
“Showing you how is easy, but if you don’t have really tiny needles you can’t do it, you know? Also, I think it might be better for Mommy to show you how to make it, she’s way better at it.”

I’m already bad at talking to strangers. On top of that, there’s a good chance that I might say something really weird, since I lack a lot of the common knowledge people around here should know. As a result, I really don’t know what I should be saying to these women. I think the best way to interact with my neighbors is probably to keep them at arm’s reach.

Da-dong, da-donnng ring the bells of the temple. Whenever the bells in the center of the temple ring, the sound echoes throughout the entire town. In an instant, every flapping mouth in the plaza snaps shut. In the next instant, someone in the crowd yells out, “Time to go, people! To the main street!!”

With the children to be baptized leading the way, we head out towards the main street in groups. At the same time, other groups of children appear from the other alleyways here and there, followed by more groups of spectators. From the edges of the town to the gates of the temple, the procession gathers in the main streets, with the children

in their white clothes at the head and their chaperones close behind. The rest of the people line the sides of the streets, seeing their children off as they join the crowd.

This scene really reminds me of, well, you know.

People, cheering and waving, are lined up by the sides of the road while a procession makes its way through the streets. Even if you can't see where the procession is, you can hear the roar of the crowd swell as it grows closer to you. It really reminds me of the New Year Ekiden.[3]

Starting from far away, I hear the cheering gradually grow closer and closer. When the procession is almost right on top of us, I glance over at Tory. She seems nervous, standing there with a stiff expression on her face. I reach up with my index finger, standing on my tiptoes as high as I can go, and poke her in the cheek.

"Huh?" she says, her eyes going wide. "What was that for?"
"Smile, Tory! You're the cutest girl in the whole world when you're smiling. It's true, you know!"

After a moment, her wide eyes slowly crinkle up as her usual radiant smile spreads across her face.

"Ugh, come on, Maine," she says, in mock exasperation.
"Hey now," says my father, "even when she's not smiling she's the cutest girl around."

What do I do about this man?

As we banter back and forth, the procession comes into view. Loud cheers, applause, and whistles fill the street around me as countless children, dressed in white, parade down the street towards the temple. Some of them are beaming, some have stiff expressions, some walk proudly, and some look very nervous.

Tory and Fey each take a step forward, leaving the crowds of spectators lined up on the side of the streets. They lightly walk towards the stream of children as they pass by, joining the line of children at the very end. Once we see that they've made it into the line, Fey's family and my family both step forward to join the procession as well.

At every bend in the main street, another few children join the crowd. At this rate, I don't even have the slightest idea how many we'll have by the time we finally get to the temple at the center of town.

Even though we're still just walking towards the temple, there's already some parents that are so deeply moved that they've burst into tears. Such as my father.

I follow the procession through the thunderous cheers, halfway jogging to try and keep up. Voices ring out from everywhere around me, so I curiously look around the area as best as I can. People watch us from the windows of the houses that line both sides of the street, some of them throwing tiny white flowers from some unknown plant down on us as some kind of blessing. The flowers thrown from the highest windows drift down gently, almost seeming like they're falling straight from the clear blue skies. The children at the front of the procession start laughing excitedly. I can't see much through the crowd, since I'm far shorter than everyone else around me, but I can see the hands of the children reaching up towards the sky, perhaps to try to catch the flowers as they fall.

At the large fountain that sits in the middle of the intersections between two main streets, the procession comes to a brief stop. Another group of children, who followed a different path to get here, meets up with ours, and the crowd starts to swell. This is as far as my father and I can go.

"Daddy, come on, this way," I say, pulling on his hand. It seems like he's intent on following the procession all the way to the temple, but I grab tightly onto his hand and try to lead him away. I drag him out of the way of the procession to the side of the streets where the sight-seers are standing, and we join them in seeing off the procession as they resume their path towards the temple.

"Tory…" sobs my father, gazing forlornly off in the direction of the temple.
"Ugh! Daddy, come on!"

Now that the procession has passed, the crowd of people is starting to thin out as people head back to their homes. I turn us around to follow the crowd, heading back in the direction of the south gate. My father, however, keeps stopping to look back to where the procession has gone, lingering regret in his eyes, leaving me wondering if we're going to actually make it to his meeting on time.

“Squad Leader! You’re late!” says Otto, glaring angrily at my father as we finally reach the gate. Otto quickly ushers him into the meeting room, leaving me, as usual, to sit down and practice writing on my slate.

It looks like, starting today, I’m going to be learning the names of the goods on the wagons that come in and out of the town, so that I can eventually read the merchants’ cargo manifests. These words are actually the first words I’ve learned from Otto that are actually usable in daily life. Today, all of the words that I’m learning are the names of vegetables that are in season.

There’s a lot of vegetables that I know about already, like “pomay” (the tomato that looks like a yellow pepper), “vel” (a kind of red lettuce), “foosha” (a green eggplant), and so on. Since I know about these, they’re easy for me to remember, but there’s also a lot of them that I haven’t actually seen on our dinner table. Those will take some more time to memorize.

I really want to head over to the market so that I can match these names to what they look like… but I don’t think I can stomach another encounter with the butchers’ shops.

As I sit there, alone, slate pencil clacking on slate, one of the younger-looking soldiers bursts into the room, holding some sort of document.

“Do you know where Otto is?” he asks.
“I think he’s in a meeting today.” I reply.
“Ah, that’s right! Now what do I do…”

It looks like today’s gatekeeper isn’t particularly good at reading official documents.

“Want me to read it for you?” I ask, holding out my hand.
“Huh? *You?*” he asks, looking at me with an incredibly dubious expression on his face.
“I can try; I *am* Otto’s assistant.”

I can understand his skepticism; after all, I look like a little girl, not the kind of person you’d expect to be able to read important paperwork. I’m used to seeing that expression by now. I really only offered out of the goodness of my heart, so if he doesn’t want to take me up on my offer I don’t particularly care either way.

He doesn't react at all to my offer, so after a few seconds I turn my attention back to my slate and continue practicing writing out characters.

"…You can read it?" he asks after a brief pause.

My confidence in my reading ability actually depends a lot on what kind of document it is. I can't yet say that I've memorized everything.

"Umm, if it's a letter of character reference or a aristocratic introduction letter then I can read it. If it's a merchant's cargo manifest then I can read the numbers but not all of the words."
"Ah, well, this is an introduction letter. Could you please?"

These aristocratic introduction letters are written in an unnecessarily overcomplicated style, making them a huge bother to read, but once you clear past all of the flowery language the meat of the document is actually very simple. All you really need to know is who is referring whom to whom, and whose seal is needed on the document.

I unroll the document, taking a deep breath of the smell of parchment and ink, then scan my skillful eye over the text within.

…Ahh, the leading private is in a meeting right now. This is a lower-ranking nobleman's introduction, so it'll be fine to make him wait until the meeting's over, right?

"Umm, this is a letter of introduction from Baron Bron, and the bearer is going to see Baron Glatz. This needs the leading private's seal."[4]

I hand the document back to the soldier, trying to remember how Otto did his job. If I've got the interaction manual in my head right, I can at least do things like this.

"Please ask the merchant who brought this letter to wait in the waiting room for lower-ranked nobility. Today's meeting was called by a high-ranking nobleman, so they'll have to wait until the meeting is over before the leading private can apply his seal. If you explain this properly, I don't think the Baron's guest will be unreasonable."
"Thanks. You're a lifesaver!"

He salutes me, tapping his chest twice with an upturned fist. I hop down off of my chair, face him, and return his salute. As Otto's assistant, it's only natural for me to be able to do these kinds of things.

Hmmm, at this rate, I'm going to wind up finding work as whatever equivalent this place has to a clerk, it seems…

I'd been thinking that I'd have figured out how to make paper before I started my apprenticeship next year so that I could start a bookstore, but things aren't really turning out like how I envisioned. Reality is pretty crushing, sometimes.

I continue practicing writing out words on my slate for a long time before my father, finished with his meeting, suddenly bursts into the room.

"We're leaving, Maine!" he says.
"Ah, a little wh—" I start to say.
"Let's talk while we're walking," he interjects, cutting me off. "Tory is waiting!"

My father stuffs my slate and pencil into my tote bag, picks me up piggyback, and starts walking briskly home.

"Daddy?! Um! I have to repo—"
"Let's get out of here before Otto catches us."
"Wait!! I have to give Mister Otto a report!"

As we quarrel, Otto catches up with us.

"Oh! Mister Otto! A merchant is here, with a letter of introduction from Baron Bron to Baron Glatz. The leading private was in the meeting, so I had him wait in the lower-ranked nobility waiting room. Please take care of him quickly!"
"As expected of my assistant! Great job, Maine."
"She's my daughter."
Otto sighs and rubs his temples in response. "I'd only entrust such an important task to such an excellent assistant," he says to me. "This squad leader here should go home immediately. Thanks to his constant fidgeting during the meeting, the high-ranking noblemen there were glaring at me! I think I lost years off of my life."
"Daddy, life is important," I say.
"Look, you heard it from Otto too: we're heading home."

His heart is absolutely set on returning home immediately, so he carries me all the way home as quickly as he can.

In the evening, we throw Tory a birthday party. My image of a proper party involves cake as a very crucial element, but we don't have anything like that in this house. So, after taking a look at our ingredients, I decided that I'd make some pseudo-french toast.

I took a loaf of hard multi-grain bread and had my mother cut it into thick slices, then took advantage of the fact that Lutz's family really appreciated my recipes to get some eggs and milk from them. My mother finished everything off by frying each slice in butter. We don't have sugar, honey, or anything like that, so I garnished it with a bit of jam made from some sort of raspberry-like berry.

I was able to do one more thing for Tory: I cut up the vegetables in the soup into cute shapes, like hearts and stars. She seemed very pleased by this.

"Here, Tory," says my father, "we have a present for you."
"Whoa… Dad, Mom, thanks!"

They've given her new work clothes, as well as the tools she'll need for her job. Now that she's seven years old and has had her baptism, she'll be starting her apprenticeship. While there are some live-in jobs available, Tory's work as a seamstress will not be one of them, so she'll be commuting back and forth.

Aha, she has her sights set on getting good at sewing and becoming a beautiful woman. She wants Ralph to call her a good girl. I understand completely.

"You're not working every day, right?" I ask.
"Well, when I'm just starting out, I'm not going to be able to do all that much, so I'll only be there about half the week."
"If they spend every day teaching apprentices, then they'll never get anything done, after all," explains my mother.

Certainly. I've experienced that first hand: on days when the apprentice soldiers have to be taught writing and math, I don't get any of my own studying done, and Otto's work only piles up further.

“And now this is for you, Maine.”

With a heavy clunk, my parents place a long, thin object, wrapped in cloth on the table in front of me. I blink my eyes, doubtfully tilting my head to one side. It wasn’t *my* baptism today, so I’m not sure why I would be getting a present as well.

“But it wasn’t my baptism today?”
“Since Tory’s going to be going to work, you’ll be in charge of going out and collecting firewood. You’ll be needing this.”

I unwrap the cloth, revealing a knife, dully gleaming in the candlelight. Its blade is thick, and when I heft it in my hands I can feel its considerable weight. In Japan, it would be unconscionable to give something so dangerously sharp to a young child, but common sense here dictates that a child that doesn’t have something like this can’t even defend herself, a baby that can’t help out or do anything useful.

They really gave me a knife.

Up until now, they’ve really been totally treating me like a baby. Tory was assisting the family, but I was only Tory’s assistant. Or, would it be more accurate to say that I was a burden that only did unnecessary things? However, now that Tory is starting her apprenticeship, it seems like I too must start to carry the proverbial knife.

But, now I’ve got a knife! I can make *mokkan*!
I’m going to make *mokkan*!!

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. Mokkan are thin, narrow wooden tablets that were used for keeping records in historical Japan. The Japanese term is what’s used in academic literature on the subject, so I’m leaving it as-is.
2. A Japanese festival for seven, five, and three-year olds, which is generally considered a kind of coming-of-age ceremony. The name literally translates to “seven-five-three”.
3. The New Year Ekiden is a long-distance relay race held every New Year between teams from major Japanese corporations.

4. “Leading Private” is a military rank. In the US Army, the equivalent rank it Private First Class.

Chapter 21
I'm Making Mokkan!

Today is the first day of Tory's new apprenticeship, and I have been seriously panicking. The responsibilities that have been thrust on me are things that I'm almost surely incapable of actually doing. I was thinking that I could use all of my modern-day knowledge to make up for my other deficiencies, but none of that knowledge is actually the slightest bit applicable.

Tory was seriously amazing as an older sister.

First of all, I can't fetch water. I can't even pull it up from the well! I lack the necessary strength. On top of that, even though I can only draw up a little to begin with, hauling it up the stairs is extremely difficult as well. If I wanted to get a single bucket's worth of water up to my home, I need to make five trips. Our household, however, doesn't need just one bucket of water. I need to fill up our entire jug. When my mother helps me fetch the water, she manages to fill the jug in about the same amount of time it takes me to fill just one bucket.

I'm useless.

When it comes time to start preparing lunch, I need to light the fire in the stove. When I was still in school, we went on class camping trips, so I know how to stack logs for making a fire. You stack the fat fuel logs with the slender, easier-to-burn kindling in a way that air can easily pass through, then use some sort of tinder, like dry grass, that catches sparks and burns hot and quick. *That*, I can do.

However, I can't actually light the fire. When I went camping, we had lighters. Here, we have flint, which I have no idea how to use at all. I watched Tory do it once, then later tried to mimic what she did.

"Wha–?!"

When I struck the two chunks of flint against each other as hard as I could, sparks flew out, as could be expected. The flash of glittering sparks right before my eyes caused me to flinch back in shock, dropping both stones to the floor. Ever since then, I've been afraid that those sparks might burn me like the sparks from fireworks, so I haven't

been able to muster up the courage to strike them together hard enough to spark. Eventually, my mother wound up doing it.

I'm really useless.

If it's helping out with cooking prep work, I can do at least that… or so I thought. However, the kitchen knife is so heavy that I have to use both hands to lift it. Plus, when I look at the trussed-up birds we need to prepare, I freeze up. All I can really do is chop up the ingredients that I can use a smaller knife on and provide recipe ideas. There's very little else I can actually do in the kitchen. I'm so short that I can't even stir things around in a frying pan, even if I'm given a stool to stand on. My mother really does praise me on my recipes, but my lackluster contributions only serve to make me increasingly depressed.

I'm *seriously* useless.

Tory arrives home from her first day at work to find me sitting in the corner, a dull, depressed look on my face. "What's wrong, Maine?" she asks.

I'm too depressed to even answer, so my mother does so for me. "…She tried to help out today, but couldn't do very much at all. I think she's depressed about how little she could actually do."
"Huh? Now?"

Yes, Tory, now. It may have taken some time, but I finally realized it. I am completely worthless.

"…I tried to do so many different things, but I couldn't do any of them at all," I mumble.
"Well, we know what your condition is," says my mother reassuringly, "so as long as you're trying your best it'll be alright, right?"
"Also, there's nobody better at cleaning than Maine!"

I have some experience pushing a broom and wiping things down; those are things that I can manage to do even if I only barely have the strength to do it. If I put too much power into it, though, my fever comes back immediately. Also, my constant cleaning efforts are not done because I want to help the family out. I'm doing it because I absolutely cannot stand living in such a filthy environment. It's for my own sake, not my family's.

In modern Japan, where we have machines to do all of the heavy work for us, I could clean, do laundry, and cook from start to finish, all by myself. Here, however, I can't do any of that at all. Honestly, I didn't think that it would be anywhere near this hard. Tory's only a year older than me and she can do it with no problems. I, however, am stuck with this inexplicably weak body, and am just dead weight.

When I somehow got reincarnated, I really would have preferred a much more robust physique. At least, robust enough to not be a hindrance.

"Ahaha, Maine," laughs my father, "are you bothered that much by being useless?"
"…Yeah, I am."
"Well, even if that's the case… I never really had any high hopes to begin with."
"Uh?"

Huh? Why is he saying something so unexpectedly cruel? Why is he *smiling*?

"Well, I think it's a bad thing that you keep collapsing as if you're about to die. I think you've done more than enough already to make yourself stronger."
Tory is the one to shrug her shoulders at that. "I think what you're saying is right," she says, "but at this rate nobody's ever going to hire her, right? She can't do anything at all."
My father shakes his head. "Not at all, she can work at the gate!"
"Huh? What can she do there?"

Tory and my mother both look at my father in bewilderment. Why they're bewildered, I have no idea.

Have they just been not paying any attention at all when I've been telling them what I do all day at the gate? Or did they just not believe me at all?

"What can she do? Paperwork, of course! Even now, when she goes to the gate she does some work as Otto's little assistant. …More than half the time, he's teaching her how to write, though."
"*Really?!* I thought she was just going there to take breaks!"
"I thought she had to have been making up all of those ridiculous stories!"

Tory, why are you acting so surprise? Also, mother, that's *mean*! Their excessively honest reactions feel like a stab in the gut.

“She’s especially suited for work that involves a lot of calculations. If she wanted, after her baptism she could work at the gates officially. How about it, Maine? Want to come work with your daddy?”
“Huh? Nuh-uh. I’m going to run a *‘bookstore’* or be a *'librarian’*.”

Unfortunately, I have zero ambition to follow my father to work every day in order to do the gatekeepers’ paperwork. However, this is a world that hasn’t yet seen bookstores or libraries, so of course everyone looks at me doubtfully, not understanding what I said at all.

“…Aaahh, Maine. What are those?”
“Someone who sells books… so, a merchant, I guess? Hmmm, maybe being a merchant isn’t quite right for me, but I’m going to do a job that involves a lot of books.”
“Well, I don’t really get what you’re saying, but I think that it’s great if you can do the things you want to do. For now, doing the things you can do is just fine. Half a year ago, you couldn’t walk to the forest at all. You could barely even go outside! Now, you can go in and out of the house as much as you want on your own.”
“…Yeah.”

Today, I was told that I needed to go out and do my best to gather some firewood, so I strapped a wicker basket to my back and went with Tory off to the forest. It’s true that I can indeed walk all the way to the forest, just like my family said, but by the time I get there, I need to take a long rest, and if I’m not very careful about how much I move around I might need to spend the entire next day in bed.

I *really* hate this feeble body.

When we got to the forest, I took a break to catch my breath, then I got up and started to help search for firewood. All I’m doing is looking around for branches that have fallen off already, but Tory actively searches for low-hanging branches, then hacks at them with a knife that’s like a small machete. They break off with a creak and a snap!

“Wow, Tory really is amazing…” I say aloud, once again impressed by Tory’s raw competency. “I’ve got to keep working hard too, doing whatever I can.”

I redouble my efforts, working until I run out of breath. I sit down on a nearby rock to take a break. Without wasting any time, I pull out my knife, intending to start make *mokkan*.

"Whoa, this is really heavy," I sigh, feeling the weight of the dully gleaming blade in my hands. Knives aren't something that I have literally zero familiarity with. In Japan, I used kitchen knives and box cutters in my day-to-day life.

However, I have basically no experience with whittling. What little I do have comes from elementary school, where we had a lesson on sharpening our pencils with little blades. At the time, however, I decided that using a pencil sharpener was good enough for me and barely paid any attention. Now, I'm regretting that decision.

Even if I decide to brave the dangers and try making *mokkan* anyway, I still don't know how to use a knife, though!

When I can't do more than timidly scrape wood off a pencil, there's no way I'd be able to wield a knife like this with any amount of skill. Will I really be able to make *mokkan*?

As an experiment, I dig through my pile of gathered branches until I find a thin branch, then I try to shave a layer off of it. It's difficult to manage with my tiny, weak hands, but I peel off a sizable strip of bark, revealing the color of the wood inside.

Ah! This might be a little bit on the difficult side, but I think I can do it!

I can simultaneously practice using my knife and make *mokkan* as well, killing two birds with one stone. With glee, I start pulling out the pieces of wood that I had gathered, whittling them until they're long, narrow, straight, and flat, then cut them to the same length and lay them out next to each other. Once I tie these together with a thin cord, I'll be able to roll them up like a scroll, and they'll really be *mokkan*. I think I can turn these into something about the size of a page from a memo pad.

Ancient civilizations, ancestors, thank you for your magnificent wisdom. Mother, father, thank you for this magnificent knife. It is thanks to you that I can make these *mokkan*.

Since the raw materials for these are just pieces of wood that I can pick up from the ground, this involves far less labor than carefully extracting grass fibers to make

papyrus or doing the back-breaking excavation work needed to get the clay to make tablets.

Excellent.

At my level of skill, I need to whittle away bit by bit to get each stick planed flat enough that I can write on it. It would be amazing if I could slice it all off in a single, powerful stroke, but there's really no point in wishing for the moon. I steadily whittle away at each stick, piling more and more finished *mokkan* next to me. With my hands as they are now, all I can whittle are fine, slender sticks. If I want to be able to actually write a book, the number of these things I'll need is not trivial at all.

"Maine, what are you making to replace your clay tablets?"[1] says Lutz as he walks over, seemingly done with gathering firewood for the day, and leans in to inspect my handiwork.

That was not the question I expected him to ask at all. I look at him quizzically.

"…Huh? Why do you think I'm making these to replace my tablets?"
"Because you looked like you were having so much fun, right?"
"Huh? I looked like I was having fun?"
"Yeah, you looked like you wanted to rub your face all over those sticks. It was the same kind of expression you had when you saw all the clay for the first time, you know?"

Huh? I was sitting alone, whittling, with an expression that looked like I wanted to bury my face in a pile of wood? …Wouldn't that make me look really strange?

…Yiiikes! I didn't realize that at all! That's extremely embarrassing!

The embarrassment of having that so unexpectedly pointed out to me makes my insides squirm, but Lutz is very focused on examining my handiwork.

"So, what are you making?"
"…I'm making *'mokkan'*."
"'Moe-kahn'? Are you going to be writing on these too?"
"Yeah, which is why I need a lot of them. I'm not very strong, so I can't make them any bigger than this."

I pick up my knife again and start whittling away. Lutz sits down next to me and grabs a somewhat larger stick of his own.

"I'll help you out! Do me a favor in return though: the next time you see that Otto guy you were talking about, could you ask him something for me?"
"What do you want to know?"
He glances around the forest clearing nervously, then leans in close to whisper in to me quietly. "I want to hear what it's like to be a trader…"

A while ago, he shared with me his dreams of becoming a trader or a minstrel, traveling from town to town and seeing the world.

Based on the fact that he was so cautious about checking to see if anyone was around and the fact that he kept his voice so low, I wonder if this world looks down on traders and minstrels? I don't really know. My personal opinion, lacking any grounding in this world's common sense, is definitely not worth as much to Lutz as what I could get from Otto if I asked him about it.

"He's a very busy man, but I'll try asking him. He might refuse, though, sorry."
"That's okay," he replies.

He breathes a sudden sigh of relief, looking like someone who has just set down a very heavy burden. He's finally found someone to talk to about something that he couldn't share with anyone.

We don't talk very much after that, and just quietly sit making *mokkan*. It looks like Lutz carries a large, wide-bladed knife like Tory's, so he's able to easily turn relatively thick branches into several wide boards each. I take those and use my own knife to clean up the writing surfaces until both sides are flawless.

I wonder if I'll be able to get someone to give me some of the ink that we use at the gate?

Fundamentally, ink is something that is used with paper, so it's not the kind of thing that you can ordinarily find in stores around here. Now that I think about it, the ink at the gate is locked up as carefully as the parchment is. It might not just be paper that's expensive, but ink as well.

Hopefully, I'll be able to convince Otto to stop paying my salary in slate pencils and to switch over to paying me ink. And, while I'm at it, I'll be able to convey Lutz's request.

The next day, I go to the gates.

It's a day where Tory has work and is thus not available to supervise me, so I head to the gates to study. Lately, the number of words I've been learning that are actually usable day-to-day has been increasing, which makes me very happy.

Starting today, we have three new apprentice soldiers; Tory's contemporaries. Otto has to teach them how to read, write, and do math, so he's suddenly very busy. After he finishes with training the new recruits, he immediately returns to the duty room and does all of the normal day-to-day work he has to do.

I myself am very busy, between learning new vocabulary and helping with computation, so I don't have very many opportunities to talk. When I notice Otto finish up one set of paperwork and start working to clean up the ink bottle, I seize my chance.

"Mister Otto, I've got a question I want to ask, is now okay?"
"Sure, what is it?"
"How do you become a trader?"
"*Huh?!* Maine, you want to become a *trader*?! Huh? Wait a minute! Is this my fault? Squad Leader's going to *murder* me!"

With huge, panicked eyes, Otto hunches forward over the desk, muttering hysterically. I'm shocked by this sudden display, and quickly wave my hands to try to dispel his fears.

"No, no, it's not for me, it's for a friend."
"Ah! Well then, you should tell them that they shouldn't try."
"Oh, it really is like that?"

Based on his terse response, it would seem like peddling is indeed an objectionable profession.

“What do you mean by 'like that’?” he says, his eyes narrowing. I briefly contemplate how to phrase things in an easy-to-convey manner, then open my mouth to speak.

“Ummm, when my friend asked me about it, he made sure that nobody was around, and he was whispering, so I thought that maybe people thought it wasn’t a good job to do.”
“Well, his parents would give him a good talking to, anyway.”
“Also, traders are always traveling, right? They’re always going here and there, thinking about what they need to buy in one place and what they need to sell in another, right? Settling down is a completely different lifestyle, where you can have familial bonds and even repeat customers, so it’s not the kind of thing that you’d think a kid who lives in a town would suddenly think that they’d want to do…”

That kind of free-wandering nomadic lifestyle seems like the kind of thing that the children of farmers, who are expected to settle down, would be drawn to. Life is so fundamentally different here, to the point where my own common knowledge doesn’t connect with it at all. Working seems to be far more strict of a thing than I was expecting.

Every day, I do things that completely backfire, and I often have no idea of why they could have possibly done so. You’d think that at some point the correct answer to be to do nothing, but even if I did nothing I’d still wind up being criticized. There’s no manual for the mass of unwritten rules that govern daily life here. I, the woman who has no idea what the correct thing to do is in this unexpected alternate reality and just wants to shut herself inside forever, do truly understand the barriers of common sense.

Well, if I were to lock myself inside, I wouldn’t have any books, so I wouldn’t have anything to do, so I basically have to go outside anyway.

“…Well, if you know that much, why didn’t you tell him?”
“Hmm, well, I think that it would be better if he heard it from you, Otto. I’ve been living in a town all my life, but you’ve got a lot of experience, so I think he’d listen to you. Also, my daddy said that you have some connections with the merchant guild, right? If my friend can’t become a trader, then maybe he could do his apprenticeship under a merchant instead. I was thinking that maybe he could still leave the town from time to time to go buy things.”

As far as Lutz's family goes, I think they'd be much more comfortable if his travels were to known parts of the world on official business, rather than aimlessly wandering through distant lands.

"Ahhh, I see what's happening here!" he says, the corners of his mouth quirking up in a sly grin. "Since you're making all this effort to be the middleman here, this kid must be your favorite, right?"

He seems to have caught a whiff of a secret love story. I shrug my shoulders.

"It's not that he's my favorite," I say off-handedly, "it's that he's always helping me out, so I feel like I should return the favor before the debts start stacking up too high."
"The kid who's helping you, is that the blond one?"

Otto must have seen us one on of the times that Lutz, serving as my pacemaker, came through the gate, dragging my exhausted self back from the forest, stopping briefly to deliver a report to my father in exchange for a little bit of pocket money.

"That's right. I know that you're super busy with the newcomers, though, so if you can't do it…"
"This is actually the least-busy season in the entire year, so this is a great time. How about during the next holiday?"
"Thanks, Mister Otto!"

Although, if this is supposed to be the least busy season, how much work am I going to actually have when it's time for me to help out with the treasurer's report and the budget compilations? I've already agreed to help, though, so that's not something I want to thinking about.

"Ah! Mister Otto, I've got one more thing I want to ask: could I please have a little bit of this ink, if you can?"
"You mean this ink?" he says, frowning as he taps the closed lid of the inkwell with one finger. The black liquid within sloshes slightly.
I nod vigorously. "Could you maybe pay me in ink instead of slate pencils from now on?"
"That's three years' wages, and I'm not giving you an advance."
"What?!"

His instantaneous reply leaves me dumbfounded, my eyes wide with shock. I want to believe that I absolutely must have misheard him, but his expression is very serious as he starts to explain.

“After you move from assistant to apprentice, your wages are going to change, but right now, even including the bonus you’ll get from helping with the budget, it’ll take you three years, I think.”
“*Three years?!* …That’s expensive!”

My expression is one of utter shock. There’s no way I could have possibly expected that it would be *that* expensive. Otto’s wry smile says that he’s going to have to start teaching me the names of the things on our budget.

“Even here, we only ever use it for the official paperwork that the nobility gives us, right? It’s far too pricey of a thing for a child to play with.”

In other words, this is absolutely not a thing that I will be able to purchase for myself. Understood.

…If that’s the case, what should I use to write on my *mokkan*? Even if I have the boards, they’re useless if I can’t write on them, right?

Chapter 22
Ink Making and Mokkan: The Conclusion

"Gaaah! I solved my paper problem, but now I have to get ink, too! Why meee!"

No store in this area sells anything like the ballpoint pens and mechanical pencils I'm used to. There are no regular pencils, no fountain pens, and, of course, there's neither liquid nor block ink. If ink were freely available, then I wouldn't need anything more than a sharp stick to write with, but ink is so expensive that I can't obtain it at all. I know how much the slate pencils I get paid in cost, but I don't know what my special wages will be during bonus season, so I can't use Otto's three-year estimate to calculate how much it actually costs.

It's *three years' worth of work*, you know?

My options here are: buy it, find it, be given it, steal it, and make it. Thinking about it, the only real option I have is to make it.

After all, there's no way I can actually steal any from the night duty room…

It seems like it's not just books that I have to hand-make, but ink as well. Even so, is making ink even something that I'm capable of doing? I know that it involves a pigment and a drying oil, but will I be able to acquire whatever pigments and oils exist in this world?

"Wouldn't it be great if I could just find an *'octopus'* or a *'squid'*? Where the heck is the ocean?!" I shout, tightly clutching the *mokkan* I've been carving. Lutz, sitting next to me, flinches. "What now?!" he says, turning to look at me.
"Lutz, can you think of anything here I can use as ink?! Or even a way I can make it?!"

Of course, going on a journey to the ocean and fishing up a octopi and squid is unrealistic. However, I can't think of a single thing amongst my possessions that I could use to make either a liquid or solid ink.

"What's 'ink'?"

“Ummm, it’s a black liquid, that you use for writing on things like these boards…”

Explaining the concept of ink to someone who’d ordinarily never see anything like it is rather difficult. Lutz tilts his head in confusion as I try to lay it out for him.

“A black thing? If you don’t mind unclean sorts of things, then do you think maybe ash or soot might work?”
“Yeah, that! I’ll try that!”

If I’m going to use ash or soot, then that’s something that my home always has around in the cinders of our fireplace. This is something that I can undoubtedly get *immediately*.

As soon as I return home, I immediately try asking my mother.

“Mommy, can I use some of this ash?”
“No, you can’t,” she replies immediately, rejecting me without any hesitation.
“Huh? Why not?”
“We use ash to make soap, melt snow, dye things, sell to farmers… it has a lot of uses, you know? Please don’t arbitrarily waste any of it.”

Come to think of it, when spring came around, I helped scatter ashes around for some incomprehensible reason, like I was in *Hanasaka Jiisan*.[1] I guess that was for melting snow, huh? I only just figured that out now. If we need to use a lot of it for making soap, then I guess it really is an important material.

Since we can sell whatever’s left over, it seems like it would be difficult for me to acquire any ash, but I wonder if my other option, using soot, would be feasible?

“Then, Mommy, could I use the soot?”

My mother scowls a little bit after I asked for another thing, but after a moment she suddenly breaks out into a smile.

“Well, I don’t know what you want to use it for, but, sure, you can have some soot.”
“Oh, yay!”
“You can have whatever you can sweep out of the stove. You can get even more if you clean out the chimney too, you know!”
“Wha?! …Ah… right. …I guess, you’re right.”

My grinning mother has taken advantage of my plight, and now I get to sweep out the chimney. This wasn't what I'd expected to have to do, but if it's for the sake of gathering soot, then I've got no choice. With fire in my eyes, I grab the narrow broom we use for sweeping the chimney, only to be stopped by my mother, her grin slipping from her face.

"Wait just one second, Maine! Are you planning on doing that in those clothes?!"
"…Huh? I shouldn't?"

These clothes are already kind of dirty and worn-out, so I have no idea how it could possibly be a problem for me to sweep out the stove in clothes like this. I look skeptically at my mother as she goes to get her sewing kit and the box of old cleaning rags.

"I'll make you something better, wait for a moment."

With high spirits, my mother stitches together some clothing made out of cleaning rags with lightning speed. I change into my new cleaning-rag clothes, then decide that it wouldn't do at all for my hair to get stained with soot, so I pin it up and use another rag as a bandana to cover my head.

Wow, I never thought I'd be doing Cinderella cosplay, but here I am.

First of all, I scrape the ashes out of the bottom of the fireplace and set them aside. After that, I stick my head in the oven and start knocking down and collecting all of the soot that I can. This is probably the first time I've actually been glad to have such a small body. I can't deny my mother's smile, so while I was at it I started sweeping out the chimney to collect the soot from there as well. As black particles crumble from the walls, the chimney starts looking cleaner and cleaner, and the pile of my much sought-after soot grows taller and taller.

This is way more fun than I thought it was going to be when I started out, and I got so engrossed in it that I wound up pushing myself too hard. The next day, my fever came back and I was laid out all day.

I may be covered in soot, I may have collapsed, but I somehow managed to collect my pile of soot. Now I need to get my health back as well… I really want to get better enough today to start working on writing with this soot.

“Maine,” asks Lutz, “what do we do with this?”
“I think we try water first?”

The first step that I came up with is dissolving the soot in water. I feel like it might turn into something ink-like. Somehow. I scoop a little bit of water from the river into a wooden bowl add some soot, and then stir it round and round with a piece of wood. The soot doesn’t seem to dissolve very well, and most of it just floats on top of the water.

“It turned out like this, huh…” I mumble.
“Well, I wonder how well you can write with it?”

I nod at him, then dip the sharpened stick we’re using in place of a pen into the bowl. Tentatively, I try marking the top of one of my *mokkan* with its page number, “1”. However, way more of the soot stuck to my stick than to the wood of the board, and the number that I wrote is so faint as to be illegible.

“Ah, man… That’s a failure.”
“What’s next?”
“Hmmm, well, my original theory was that I should try mixing the soot with oil, but…”

Oil is one thing I can’t request from my mother. Vegetable oil is used not only in a lot of our cooking, but I also use a lot of it to make my simple shampoo, so we never have enough of it. Also, animal-based oils are used for making candles and soaps, so I think that’s not something I can easily get either. Probably, my mother would shoot down my request as quickly as she did when I asked about the ashes.

“Using oil, huh. I guess you couldn’t get any?”
“Yeah, it’s impossible. Is there nothing else we could try…?”

Searching for hints, I flip through in my mind all of the Japanese writing implements I can think of.

“Ah, the *'paints'* that were used in *'Japanese painting'* used *'gelatin glue'*… but, I’m not allowed to use any fire, so that’s not going to work.”

In the future, I might be able to try making a gelatin-based ink, but right now I don't have that kind of setup. If I were to be able to use gelatin, then I could make paints out of natural materials, so my options would dramatically increase. However, I can't actually wait until I grow up.

"Heeey, Maine, you still with me?" says Lutz, waving his hand back and forth in front of my face to bring my thoughts back down to earth. "Snap out of it."

"Hmmm, well, it's probably okay if it's not a liquid. We could make something like *'crayons'* or *'chalk'* or… *'pencils'*… Ah, right! We can use clay! Let's mix it with clay!"
"Huhh?" he says, an extremely skeptical look on this face.
"If I'm not mistaken, mixing *'graphite'* with clay will give me something like *'pencil lead'*. Like, um… *'conté'*, maybe…?[2] Well, whatever. We're using soot, not *'graphite'*, but I think it'll work out!"

Mix soot and clay, make it into round, slender sticks, then let them dry out. Once they harden up, I may actually be able to write with them.

"Lutz, back when we were making *'clay tablets'*, we dug up the clay somewhere around here, right?"
"We don't have to dig any up, actually. Last time, we dug up more than we used, and I think we put the leftovers somewhere around that rock."

Just like he says, there's a small pile of clay over there. I take a bit of it, then knead soot into it until it's thoroughly mixed. My mental image here is something like a Coupy Pencil[3] or the core of a pencil. If touching it doesn't blacken your fingertips, it won't produce a usable color.

Both my hands and the rock that I'm using as a work surface get stained pitch black as I work. I roll my soot pencils into long, slender tubes, then cut them down to about the length of a pencil. If these harden up when they dry, then this will be a great success.

I try to wash my hands off in the river, but they don't get much cleaner. I'm going to have to scrub down with soap when I get home. These persistent stains, however, make me feel like I'll definitely be able to write with these.

"How long should we let these dry for, I wonder?" I say.
"Who knows?"

“Should we maybe try baking them?”
“Let’s not do anything unnecessary. They might explode again.”
“Urgh…”

Over the next few days, my soot pencils gradually start to dry out and solidify. I wrap one in an old dust rag so that I’ll be able to use it without staining my hands. After that, I use my knife to sharpen the tip, then try writing a letter.

It writes! It may crumble very easily in my grip, but for now, I can write with these. These will be less like books and more like antique media, but this *works*.

“We did it! Lutz, it writes!”
“Oh! Good job.”

I, having made my own writing implements from scratch, cheerfully work on making more *mokkan*. Since I have a guaranteed source of materials as long as I go out to gather firewood, I can accumulate these things very cheaply. The best part about this is that I’m able to do everything, from start to finish, with my own power. The only major problem with these is that they’ll be very bulky when they start to pile up, but that was going to be a problem with clay tablets, anyway. I’ll just have to deal with it until I’m an independent adult.

My pile of completed *mokkan* grows to satisfaction, but one day I return from the forest to unexpectedly find that they’ve disappeared. The place I’ve been stockpiling them is suddenly empty.

“G… gone?! They’re gone? What?!”
“What’s wrong, Maine?”

As I frantically search through the storeroom for my missing *mokkan*, my mother pokes her head in to see what’s the matter.

“Mommy, do you know what happened to the *'mokkan’* I left here?”
“'Moe-kahn’? Well, what are those?”

“Ummm, they’re pieces of wood, and they’re a bunch of different sizes, but they’ve all been flattened on both sides so that I can write on them…”

“Ah, the firewood you brought back? I used it, you know?”
“Uh? Huh? You used it? Why?”

My head suddenly goes completely blank.

“It was the firewood that you worked so diligently to bring back after you worked so hard to get strong enough to help out, you know? It wouldn’t be nice for me to not use it.”
“But, the pile of firewood is over there, right? Why did you use the pile that I specifically kept separated from that? Those were a compilation of the fairy tales you told me to get me to sleep at night!”
“Aw,” she says, stroking my head, “if you want me to tell you stories, all you need to do is ask.” She smiles, thinking that her daughter will still be spoiled rotten no matter how much time may pass.
“That’s not what I meant…”

Not a single one is left. I stare blankly at the spot where my *mokkan* used to be, and all of the strength leaves my body. All of the effort I put into them, all of the *struggle*, was for naught. They’re cinders. When I think about that, I don’t think I can get motivated for anything again.

The moment my strength fails me, a heat that was buried deep inside my body explodes out. A fever, stronger than the ones I get after getting too excited or working too hard, blasts through me in an instant. In its grip, my limbs go numb and I lose all ability to move.

“What’s…”

Without any understanding of what could possibly be happening within my body, I suddenly collapse, whimpering like I was trapped in a nightmare.

My consciousness trembles as I slowly sink deeper into the churning, swirling fever. I feel like I’m slowly dying, bit by bit, under the fever’s relentless assault. It’s only now that I’m experiencing it firsthand that I can clearly comprehend how the real Maine could have been swallowed whole by a fever like this.

As I slip further and further away, without even the willpower to struggle against it, flashes of worried faces pass through my consciousness, my family members looking in, concerned, to check on me. Lutz’s face is among them.

…Why… is Lutz…?

I push my way up towards him, and my submerged consciousness starts to float back to the surface. I strain my temples, pushing even harder, and everything comes into focus. This isn't just an image that floated itself across my mind. I've consciously managed to get Lutz focused in my field of view.

"Maine?" he says, his eyes wide.
"…Lutz?"
"Mrs. Eva!" he yells, turning towards the kitchen. "Maine w…woke up!"

My mother rushes into the room.

"Maine. You collapsed so suddenly, and I thought you'd never wake up again!"
"Yeah… sometimes, I saw your face. I'm sorry to make you worry. …Mommy, my throat is really scratchy. I feel really sticky too, so I want to wash myself off. Could you bring me some water?"
"Alright, I'll be right back," she says, turning to leave.

As soon as I see her step out, I grab Lutz's hand tightly. I still can't even raise my head, lying down like this.

"…Lutz," I whisper, "I failed again. My mother burned all of my *'mokkan'*."
"Oh maaan… Well, they do really just look like weirdly-shaped cuts of wood."
"But I put so much effort into them, and I put them aside on purpose…"

I can't take anymore. Fate itself has decreed that I'm never going to finish my book.

I sigh in defeat, and I can feel the fever start to come back to life. I shake my head to clear it before I'm pulled under again.

"Don't get so down," says Lutz. "Doesn't that just mean that we should try something that doesn't burn well?"

My *mokkan* were made out of wood, so they were used for firewood. If that's the case, then we should make them out of something that won't get burned. Lutz's suggestion is like a spark of light in the darkness.

Now is not the time to be drowning in fever. I need to think of a good replacement material. I focus all of my willpower inward, feeling like I'm grabbing hold of the fever and squeezing it down into the tiniest ball I can.

"…What do you think we could use that wouldn't burn?" I say, after a long pause. I've put some thought into it, but I really can't come up with anything, either because my mind is still hazy from the fever or because I just don't know what I could find around here that would work.
"Ummm, maybe, bamboo, or something like that?"
"Ah!! …Lutz, you're a genius!"

Bamboo pops when it burns, so it's probably not the kind of thing that you'd simply burn. Hope floods through me once more. When that happens, for some reason my fever starts going down as well, and I can breathe a little more comfortably.

"Oh, what are you talking about?" asks my mother, entering the room carrying a bucket of water. Lutz and I glance at each other.
"It's a secret," I say, with a little grin. "Maine," says Lutz, "I'll go out and get that, so you absolutely need to make sure you get better, okay?"
"Thanks, Lutz! You're so sweet."
His eyes go wide. "Th-this is just so you'll introduce me to Otto!" he yells, fleeing from the room. "I'm paying you in advance, so you'd better get healthy! Got it?!"

As his footsteps fade away, I start to scrub myself down with the water that my mother brought in for me.

This fever was *strange*. I can't think of a single disease that would cause a fever to suddenly explode out like that, especially not one that would slowly devour at my consciousness. Plus, I've definitely never heard of any sort of fever that could be forced aside through sheer willpower alone. What the heck kind of sickness is this, wriggling around in my body?

When I first came here, I was getting feverish fairly regularly, but I didn't think that was particularly strange. However, once I managed to train my body into being a little bit more robust, then the strangeness of my fevers became much more apparent. What the heck could be wrong with this body? My family, however, is not at all affluent enough to afford a doctor in this world, and there's no encyclopedia of common diseases around, so this isn't something that I can immediately research.

…Well, if I concentrate on bringing down my fever, it seems to go down slowly, so maybe we'll just wait and see?

After two more days of thinking about dealing with my fever, Lutz comes to my home in the evening, with a bundle of bamboo that he cut down to the perfect size for use as bamboo slips.[4] He even shaved off all of the skin, so I can start writing on them right away.

"Don't even think about touching these until you're healthy again," he says, sternly. "Got it? If you break this promise, I'll never help you again."
"Okay. Thanks, Lutz."

I hold on to just one slip, and ask my mother to put the rest of them in the storage room. I'm still too sick to get out of bed, but as soon as my fever's gone down all the way, I'll be able to write on these and then *finally* finish my work. My first priority, then, is to get better.

Holding tightly to the bamboo slip that Lutz brought me in one hand, I gradually drift off to sleep. Just when I was almost completely out, though, loud cracks start piercing through the air.

"Gyaah?!" screams my mother from the kitchen.
"W… what?! What happened?"

Crack after crack rings out from within the oven, like there's something inside that's bursting open. My mother storms into the room, livid.

"Maine! What did Lutz bring into this house?!"
"…Bamboo?"
"Ugh! That was misleading! I thought he was bringing us firewood, since you can't go and get any!"

I suddenly realize the source of those cracking sounds. She burnt the bamboo, thinking that it was firewood. It sounds like it's exploding with far more force than the bamboo that I'm used to; is bamboo different in this world?

“Oh, did you mistake it for firewood, since the skin was already shaved off? …Wait, don’t bamboo and wood look different, though?”
“Bamboo and vanihitz wood look very similar, you know?”
“I’ve never seen that kind of tree before, so I guess I didn’t know…”

I don’t recognize the name of that tree. At least, when I was at the forest, I didn’t see any sort of tree that resembled bamboo.

“What are you talking about? That’s the wood you were using to weave baskets with Tory during the winter. It’s what your own basket’s made out of!”
“Oh, I remember now. I guess they really do look similar once you peel off the bark.”

I remember, now that I think back to the preparations that Tory had been doing for her basket-weaving winter work. Vanihitz wood looks like any other wood while the bark is on, but it looks very much like bamboo once it’s peeled off.

“Anyway, don’t bring any more bamboo into the house. It’s dangerous! Are we clear?”
“…Yes…”

Bamboo is forbidden as well. Yeah, I was afraid of this, ever since I heard those first pops. I’m sorry, Lutz, since you tried so hard…

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. Hanasaka Jiisan is a Japanese folktale.
2. Conté are a kind of crayon, which are made of compressed graphite or charcoal and use either clay or wax as a base.
3. Coupy Pencils are a brand of plastic pencil.
4. Bamboo Slips were one of the main recording media of early China.

I usually don’t translate the author’s notes, but this one’s fairly important information:

“The next chapter will be a little bit of a breather. It’ll be a chapter about cooking, not really related to the main thread of the plot.”

Chapter 23
Cooking Tribulations

Here are some things that happened while I was still waiting for my soot pencils to dry out.

Now that Tory's started going to work, cooking has been added to my list of duties. However, I can't hold a kitchen knife very well and I don't really know how to make or properly use fire, so right now there's very little that I can do from start to finish entirely on my own. Right now, I work with my mother, helping out as much as I possibly can.

I've been struggling with this for a while, but I really want to do a few experiments to see if I can finally start eating Japanese food again. Originally, I was ready to blast this kitchen apart with all my modern knowledge, but when I let it loose, the result was less of a blast and more of a fizzle.

After all, it's fundamentally hopeless, right from the beginning. I really crave Japanese food, but there's no rice. No miso. No soy sauce. You can't buy mirin or other kinds of sake anywhere, of course. If I don't have the right seasonings, I don't think I've got any options. I can't think of anything I can actually make.

Well, you know, I actually do know how to make miso and soy sauce, right? If I've got the ingredients, I've got the knowhow. It's just soybeans and koji[1]. I learned it in elementary school! We went on a field trip to a miso factory, and I actually paid a lot of attention to how they made it in the olden days.

But, where do I find soybeans or koji in this world? It's possible that I could substitute some other kind of bean for soybeans, but where can I actually buy koji? Of course, you can make koji from things that you can find in nature, but that's a really scary proposition. After all, koji is *mold*, right? If I mess up even a little bit, I'm going to drag every single member of my family into a nightmare of food poisoning. Even if I were to just happen across koji, then there's still the terrifying thought of trying to ferment something in this bacteria-infested place, *plus* it will put off enough of a stench that it'll get thrown out long before it's complete.

So, I gave up on making my own seasonings and started thinking long and hard about what kinds of Japanese food I could possibly make without any Japanese seasonings at all.

How about sashimi? We don't have any soy sauce, but if you eat it with citrus fruit juice mixed with salt, that would still be tasty, right?

Although, this place doesn't seem to be close to the ocean. Even when I search through the town market, I can't find anyone selling fresh saltwater fish. There's no wakame or other kinds of seaweed for sale, either. Forget sashimi, I can't even make a seaweed salad.

So, if there's no seafood, there's obviously no kombu. No bonito flakes, either. I want to make Japanese food, but I can't even make dashi[2]. This is a fatal blow.

Man, I'm not even going to ask for instant dashi… just, give me some kombu and bonito flakes, please?

There's these cucumber-like things that could be pickled, but I don't have soy sauce, my mother won't let me use any sugar, and I don't have any kind of vinegar to use except wine vinegar, so the taste is so wildly different that I can't be satisfied with it at all. I tried making it once, but it was so harshly sour that it was nothing at all like the pickles I was thinking of.

Vexed over my inability to do anything at all, I tried something very simple that even a child like me could do: I rubbed salt into slices of a pseudo-cucumber and ate it. The salt drew out a little bit of the moisture and made it just a little bit more tender, and it had the perfect amount of saltiness to remind me just a little of tsukemono[3]. I thought that I'd finally be satisfied once I'd tasted something remotely Japanese-y, but, on the contrary, it only made me cry for the white rice I so dearly miss. Incidentally, I tried putting the salted cucumber on the multi-grain bread we have in the house, but that didn't work at all; they don't have particularly good affinity.

Rice! Rice! Japanese food! Someone, please! Give me some Japanese food!!

Thanks to those cucumbers, my cravings for Japanese food became so great that I thought I might try going to the river, catching some fish, and making something even vaguely Japanese. I can't use fire, so I don't have any alternatives but drying, so I decided to try drying out whatever fish I could catch. If I brought along some salt, then

I could salt the fish and let it dry, and that might even work. …I really hoped it would work.

“Hey, Lutz,” I said. “I want to catch some fish. Can I do that in this river?”
“I don’t think you’d be able to.”

Just like he said, I was completely defeated. Fishing is, by itself, its own challenge.

As I sat there, dejected, Lutz caught some fish and brought them over to me.

“Look, I caught some, but what are you thinking of doing?”
“Can I have these?”
“Yeah, sure, I don’t really need them.”
“Lutz… are you able to make a fire? I want to try making *‘shioyaki’*.”[4]

I can’t wait at all, so I try cooking the fish he brought me shioyaki-style, like I would sweetfish. Then, I took a bite.

…Foul!
Bitter!
Awful!

My face immediately scrunched up after just one bite. Strange, it was far less refined of a taste than I was expecting. What on earth could make it smell so awful? I didn’t think my grilling methods were wrong, so I tilted my head to the side, searching my memories to figure out what could have possibly happened. Lutz looked on with a frown.

“If you don’t cook it right,” he says, “it must really stink when you eat it like that, right?”
“……Yeah, it stinks.”

This is a stinky fish. It would have been great if he told me that earlier.

Next, I pulled out my knife. It’s different both in form and function than a modern kitchen knife, and it’s a little bit worn, but that’s not going to have any effect on the flavor. I sharpened a stick and then speared the fish through, thinking I could actually make dried food like this. I left it alone for a while as I gathered firewood so the sun

could dry it out. While I wasn't paying attention, though, it suddenly became rock-hard and inedible. It seems like, somehow, too much moisture evaporated.

"Maine… what *is* this?"
"…Fish that dried too much. Dried fish is supposed to be food, but you can't eat this at all."
"Yeah, I'll say. No matter how I look at it, that doesn't look like food at all."
"I might be able to make *'dashi'* with this, though. I'm going to bring these home and try that out."

This might have been inedible as dried food, but there was a chance I might be able to use it as a base for dashi. When I got home, carrying the withered husks of the fish, I tried my hand at making dashi.

"Maine, what are you doing?!" yelled my mother as soon as she saw what I was doing.
"That's disgusting! Don't you dare put that thing in my pot!"
"Umm, Mommy, I want to try making *'dashi'*, though…"
"Absolutely not! The only thing that goes in that pot is food."

…It probably would have *become* food, though.

Thanks to the fact that my mother finds dried fish disgusting, my plans to make dashi have been strongly prohibited. Maybe it's because of the fact that she doesn't often see fish in her daily life that she seems to think that dried-out fish are disgusting. Even though she *did* look at a pig whose skull was split half open and say that it looked delicious…

I'm sorry, Mister Fish.

In conclusion: making Japanese food is impossible, at least for me. Without dashi and without seasonings, there isn't a single thing left for me to try. Once I give up on finding miso, soy sauce, or sake, there's basically no Japanese-style cooking left for me to try. I'm keenly aware of how fundamentally important these seasonings are.

For now, at least, I need to be thinking about what kind of foods I can make that, even if they're only tangentially Japanese, still have the kinds of flavors that you might find in Japan. Even that would be worthwhile. Yeah.

Then, somehow, a bird was delivered to my house. It seems like one of our neighbors managed to bring down five birds while in the forest. In this season, it would be almost impossible for them to eat all of that before it spoiled, so they gave it to my father, repaying him for when he did that same for them a while ago.

The one to handle preparing this bird, whose name I don't even know, was my mother. The knife used to prepare the meat is very large, so not only I but even Tory can't handle it.

"Maine. Come here and pluck the feathers for me," she says.
"O, okay…"

I grabbed hold of the bird as it lay limply on the table, then started pulling out its feathers. The disturbing sensation of the feathers pulling free sent shivers through me, giving me goosebumps. I told myself that I had no choice, and it's all for the sake of eating it, so I plucked the feathers, struggling not to cry. It looks like it'll be a long while before doing this sort of work becomes simple for me. However, when it came time to clean out the internal organs, I'm proud to say that I didn't faint, didn't run away, and was able to stay standing. I think I've grown a little, if I may say so myself.

"Now, Maine, we're ready to start cooking."
"Got it!"

After a lot of thought, I realized that I might be able to make a stock out of the leftover chicken carcass. If I have chicken carcass soup as a base, the number of things I can cook dramatically increases. I have neither kombu nor bonito flakes, but I wondered if I could make a usable stock if I substituted some other dried mushrooms for shiitake.

However, just making the soup was difficult. My mother had no idea what I wanted to do, and didn't help at all. It seemed she wanted to eat it grilled. I firmly insisted that it was my day to be the cook, however, and got her to give me the carcass and a few other large cuts of meat. After that, I was left to do everything myself.

I filled our biggest pot with water, then added the carcass, some breast meat, and some herbs one-by-one. Next, I started going through our vegetables, looking for things that have the right taste, smell, and texture even if they didn't have the right taste. I found that smelled like an onion, something that tasted a little like ginger, something that smelled a bit like garlic, and some leaves that were kind of like bay

leaves, and so on. In order to get rid of any foul smells the bird might give off, I started adding these things to the pot one by one.

“Maine, wait!!” cries my mother, suddenly.
I freeze, knife in hand, holding the garlic-smelling plant on the cutting board by the leaves. “Huh?”
“That’s too much for you to handle. It’s brutal!”

I stared blankly down at the vegetable, which looked like an ordinary radish, but white. She rushed over to confiscate both the knife and the radish. Grasping it tightly by the leaves, she holds it firmly down on the cutting board, giving it a look like she’s daring it to run away. With a scowl, she chopped straight down, slicing the top cleanly off. At the same instant, I heard a sharp scream. From the radish.

“Uh? What?”

I blinked disbelievingly, convinced that I had to have misheard. My mother let go of the leaves, flipped the knife sideways, and smashed down on the radish with a loud bang, just like how you crush garlic. Crushing it like that took way less time than the fine-grained chopping I was planning on doing, so I thought she had saved me a lot of effort. When she lifted the knife, though, the white flesh of the radish had somehow turned red, almost like blood had spread over its surface. Scary.

“All set,” she says. “You can use this once you make sure to wash it properly.”
“…Okay.”

My mother’s expression seemed far more brutal than the radish was. I was just seeing things, right? Yeah. just seeing things. A trick of the eyes.

In this world, I occasionally see vegetables that resemble ones that I know from Earth, but there are lots of incomprehensibly strange foods here too. Whenever I run across a weird ingredient like this one, it only just reawakens the feelings that I’m no longer in the world I know.

Despite that little incident, I carefully skimmed the denatured fats off the top of the broth, taking with it the leaves that I used to soak up the bad flavors. I remember hearing that you’re supposed to bring everything to a boil, drain off all the water, and then re-fill the pot clean water, but I’ve never had a soup that tasted bad because I

didn't do that. I ignored that particularly bothersome step and just let it simmer over a low heat.

After I let it simmer for a while, I pulled out just the breast meat from the stock. I quickly quenched it in water, then pulled the tender meat apart into shreds. This will be delicious as a garnish on top of a salad.

As the soup simmered atop the stove, I worked on preparing the rest of the meat. I took the heart, the gizzard, and the other parts that go bad super easily and chopped them into chunks small enough to easily eat, then sprinkled salt and liquor on them. It's a simple way of baking these so you can more easily eat them. This is probably the kind of cooking that my family will be most easily able to understand. For an instant, the words "charcoal grill" flashed across my mind, but I had other ways to cook it so I gave up on the idea.

Our dinner was going to be organs and thigh meat. My mother slaved away over the thighs, cooking them like roast chicken, and prohibited me from interfering with that at all. I sprinkled salt and liquor on the breast meat, then put it aside in the winter preparation room so that I could use it in the next day's cooking. If I had a refrigerator or airtight plastic bags, I could make chicken ham, but, alas, I don't.

"…That smells pretty good!" says my mother.
"The taste isn't quite there yet."

My mother had been avoiding the stock pot as if it she thought it contained something unpleasant, but the scent of soup that started wafting through the air made her come a little closer to investigate. There was nothing left to do on the soup but let it simmer and carefully skim off the fat, so I started finely chopping some of the vegetables. Thanks to this body, everything I want to do takes a tremendous amount of time, so it's best if I start on my next steps early.

My first experiment in my plan to eat Japanese-y food was nabe.[5] After all, I thought, if you have dashi, you can make nabe, right? I don't have access the dashi that I'm familiar with, but I had chicken soup. I have neither ponzu[6] nor sesame sauce, so I decided to cook pomay (the fruit that looks like a yellow pepper but tastes like a tomato) and some herbs into the broth make it into something like a tomato nabe.

I took the wingtips, which my mother says are hard to actually use because they're so bony, and added them to the pot. While they cooked, I chopped up some various

seasonable vegetables, none of which I know the name for, into the right size for serving. When these are all cooked together in the broth, they'll be quite delicious. That's nabe's true charm, I think.

"Ah," I said, "That looks about ready." I set a strainer on top of our second-biggest pot.
"Mommy, could you help me, please?"
"What do you need me to do?"
"I want to pour all of the soup in here to strain it, so that I can get out the parts I don't want in it."
"…Right," she said, looking a little bit relieved, "there's no way we were going to eat that, after all."

She poured out the chicken carcass soup into the strainer. I washed out the first pot, then had her pour the filtered soup back in there. Our second-biggest pot is the most-used pot in the house, so using that to keep soup stock would be a huge hindrance. Even my next few steps in making pomay nabe needed that pot.

I added some chopped, dried mushrooms to the finished soup stock, then got to work on making the pomay nabe. I carefully pulled the edible meat off of the boiled carcass and wingtips that we strained out of the soup, taking care to avoid stabbing myself on all of the tiny bones in the meat.

Based on the delicious scent of my mother's roast chicken that drifted through the room, and the amount of time I think it's been since we started, I thought it was just about time for me to put the finishing touches on the nabe.

"Maine! What are you doing?!"
"Putting… the vegetables in?"
"You have to boil those first!"

Generally speaking, when my mother cooks vegetables she boils them until they're limp to make them less bitter, then drains the water and uses just the boiled vegetables in the dish. This, however, gets rid of half the flavor and quite a bit of the nutritional value. I can't really complain about my mother's cooking, but when it comes to my own recipes, being forced to do things my mother's way would be a problem.

"For this kind of cooking it's okay," I explain.

“Aren’t you going to ruin that tasty-looking soup that you’ve worked so hard to make?”
“It’ll be fine!”

I boiled everything together while skimming off the fat, until finally the pomay nabe was complete. I gave it a little taste, and it was great. Even without boiling the vegetables first, everything turned out fine. Yep!

“I’m home!” said Tory as she walked through the door. “A~ah! It was coming from here!”
“Hi, Tory! What was coming from where?”
“I could smell this amazing smell from all the way down the main street! I got really hungry just smelling it as I walked. All the people I was passing were trying to find where it was coming from. I didn’t think it was coming from here!”

Is it like how you suddenly get hungry when you pass by a Chinese restaurant or a ramen shop? This chicken carcass soup has a really powerful aroma.

“I’m home,” said my father, returning home from the day shift. “Oh! That was my house I was smelling!”

It seemed like the scent of my chicken soup reached far and wide. My family gathered at the table, faces gleaming with anticipation. They all came together just in time for their dinner.

“This is made from a bird that Al dropped by to give us earlier today,” explains my mother. “He’s returning the favor from when you shared some of your hunting earlier. Maine and I cooked it up.”
“So, this unusual recipe is Maine’s, then?”
“That’s right.”

In the center of the table, my mother placed her roast chicken legs. Next to that is a salad, garnished with pulled chicken breast meat. Near my father, I put the salted, baked organ meats out as snacks, and I lined up bowls of pomay nabe for everyone. When it’s all split out like this, though, it’s not really nabe. It’s more like an ordinary pomay soup.

“What’s this?” asks Tory. “It smells really good. Can I eat it?”

“It’s pomay soup,” I reply. “I did my best making soup from the bird, so I think it’s going to be delicious. Try it!”

As I talked, Tory brought her face really close to her bowl of soup, eyes glittering, then grabbed her spoon and had a taste.

“Whoa, delicious! How?! This is really delicious.”
My mother tried a mouthful. “Oh my, it is!” she said, sincerely. “I’m really surprised. You were stewing bird bones and you didn’t cook the vegetables first, but it still turned out this well.”

It looked like she’d had a knot of anxiety within her about whether it was going to be delicious, since she knew what went into making it.

“Amazing, Maine!” said my father, attacking his food with zeal. “You’ve got a real talent for cooking.”

I tried a spoonful myself. The chicken stock had a very good flavor, splendidly bringing out the umami of the vegetables. Delicious.

Delicious, but not Japanese food.

The next day, I finished gathering firewood in the forest quickly and headed home. The younger kids have to come and go at specific times, but Tory, who’s already been baptized, seems to be able to come and go freely without having to ask permission. I went back early with her.

Since I wanted to use the leftover chicken meat, Tory wasn’t the only cook for the day. For round two of my plan to try to eat Japanese food, I wanted to make poultry sakamushi.[7] I thought that even though I don’t have sake, it might have a similar feel to it if I use another type of alcohol.

“You said you want to use the leftover chicken, do you know what you want to make already?”
“Yeah, I want to make *'sakamushi'* out of bird meat, *'gnocchi'*, and a salad. How does that sound?”
“Umm… I don’t really understand, but I’ll leave it to you.”

First up was the gnocchi. I boiled some tubers, mashed them, and mixed them with multigrain flour and a little bit of salt. Commoners don't have the budgetary freedom to use wheat flour as much as they want, so we use mixed-grain flour instead. It's a combination of rye, barley, and oats. I mixed it into a dough that's about as firm as my earlobe, rolled it out into a long tube, and started cutting it into one-centimeter pieces.

"If you don't mind," I asked, "could you take these things that I'm cutting out and flatten them out like this?" With a bit of difficulty, I use the back of a fork to spread out and flatten a chunk of dough.
"Got it," she said, with a big nod.

Spreading out the dough with a fork leaves ridges, so when it's rolled into a finger shape, it holds sauce very easily. One by one, Tory stretched out each piece of dough that I cut off. Since she has more strength than I do, every piece I cut off is stretched into the right shape in no time.

"Tory, you're way better at this than me."
"Really? …Maine, don't look at me, you just keep cutting. I'll run out if you don't, you know?"

I have Tory fill up a pot with water, put everything in, and bring it to a roiling boil. When they started floating to the top of the pot, they were finished. I took the leftover pomay soup from last night, add more pomay to it, and stew it until it's reduced to a thick sauce. Right before it's time to eat, I'll mix the gnocchi with this sauce, but that's about all I can do on this for now.

"That's all for now, right? The salad comes together really quickly, too…"
"Mom will be home soon, so it's okay if we start the salad now, right?"

As Tory and I made the salad, our mother came home. As soon as I saw her come in, I went to the winter preparation room to fetch the breast meat I set aside yesterday so that I could start on the sakamushi. I'd left the meat in a room that's always cool, on a rock that was cool to the touch, but in this warm season, I was scared of it spoiling. Cautiously, I sniffed the meat.

…Alright, it didn't spoil. This is fine.

"Maine, will this pot do?"

“Yeah! Thanks, Tory. Since I seasoned this with salt and alcohol yesterday, we can get started immediately.”

Since we don’t have any pepper to use as a seasoning, I had no choice but to give up on making it spicy. The actual recipe is very simple. You season the breast meat with salt and alcohol, lightly grill just the surface, then put it in a pot with more alcohol and cover the lid to let it steam.

I thought that I should add the mushrooms I worked hard to gather up in the forest, to help bring out the flavor. I washed them clean, then lined them up on the cutting board. As I lifted my knife, Tory’s eyes snapped up.

“Maine, stop! If you don’t put those in the fire first, they’ll dance!”
“Huh?”

No sooner than she had said that, she’d already started skewering the mushrooms from their base through the cap. Then, she sprinkled them lightly with salt and stuck them in the fire.

Dance? The *mushrooms* would? Like… how bonito flakes flutter in drifting steam? I did not understand what she said at all.

I doubtfully tilted my head to one side, trying to figure out what she meant. Tory pulled the lightly-toasted mushrooms from the fire, turned, and handed them back to me.

“Now they’re okay,” she says. “Th… thanks…?”

I decided that it was a strange turn of phrase, but if Tory said it was okay to use them now, then it must be okay. It’s just one more strange foodstuff on the pile: a mushroom that requires extra care in preparation. I cut them up, taking care not to burn myself on the hot mushrooms.

“Mommy, can I use this alcohol for cooking? It won’t taste good if I don’t use enough of it, so I need about half a cupful.”
“Alright, here you go,” she says filling it halfway full.

I took the cup from her, then climbed up on a stool, stretching up on tiptoes to pour it into the iron pot. It hissed as it hit the hot metal, and I quickly covered the pot with a

lid. When I heard it start to bubble, I removed it from the fire, cooking the chicken with just the heat still trapped in the metal of the pot.

“You’re taking it off already?”
“Yeah. I’m going to cook the meat for another ten minutes just using the heat in the pot. If I cook breast meat over a fire for too long, it’ll get all dry and hard to eat.”

I heated the pomay sauce I made from the leftover soup and the fresh gnocchi, then mix them together. Tory’s salad was finished as well. Just like the previous day’s dinner, we used shredded breast meat as a topping. I’m very pleased with how that meat turned out.

“Today’s dinner looks great too!”
“We’ll have to be sure to thank Al.”

Given the state of our budget, seeing so much food lined up on the table like that is a rare sight indeed. It’s a big deal to give someone a bird like that.

“I’m home,” said my father, walking through the door with a big smile on his face and high expectations for dinner. “Another delicious looking meal today!”

He told us about how much he was bragging about last night’s meal to his coworkers at the gate. I hoped that his overly-doting-father filter was making him massively exaggerate. I’d be much happier if it was all in his head. If it wasn’t, it’s going to make it a bit harder for me to go to the gates.

“Let’s dig in!”
“Whoa, amazing! This is delicious, Maine!”

Tory’s eyes went wide as she took a bite of sliced-up poultry sakamushi. As soon as my mother had one mouthful, she smiled brilliantly.

“It’s so simple to make, but this breast meat is so wonderfully tender. The flavor of the mushrooms has baked into it as well, it’s really delicious. Is it because we used good liquor, I wonder?”
“I think so. The whole dish brings out the depth of flavor of the honey wine.”

As soon as I said that, my father’s face went pale, and he dropped his fork with a clunk. He stood up and woodenly walked to the shelves, picking up the earthenware pot in

which we store the alcohol. When he saw how much was missing from the small pot, his head suddenly dropped, and he looked like he was moments away from bursting into tears.

"…M, my precious alcohol got…"

Sorry, sorry. I mean, when I asked my mother for some alcohol, she said that it was something that he'd gone off and bought in secret, and that it would be such a shame if all of us couldn't enjoy how delicious it was. She had a bit of a wicked smile on her face when she said that, and I thought it would be best to just follow along through that unusual occurrence.

Since it was honey wine that I used, it had a different sort of sweetness than it would have if I'd used real sake, so once again it wasn't really much like Japanese food. It was another completely different thing.

Aaah, I really want Japanese food…

Although words like "dance", "struggle", and "danger" come up when talking about some of the ingredients here, it looks like I'm able to adapt the kinds of cooking that I'm familiar to this new world without any problems. On other days, I made a tuber-based gratin, a pseudo-risotto out of a grain kind of like buckwheat, and a quiche made on top of the stiff dough of the multigrain bread, all of which were well-received.

My family may like everything I make, but as for me, I can't stand this at all. Even if I'm making Western-style food, we don't have any spices or seasonings, and I'm starting to get very tired of the same sorts of flavors over and over again.

At the very least, give me pepper! I'd be overjoyed with curry powder!

There are still many tribulations ahead in my quest to better my culinary life.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

For the most part, I've left food and ingredient names untranslated unless there's a well-established English equivalent, as is usually done when talking about Japanese cooking. I've tried to phrase things so that things are as obvious as possible in context, but there are a few things that require basically immediate explanation.

1. Koji is a fermentation starter made of various molds, yeasts, and bacteria.
2. Dashi is a cooking stock made of kombu and bonito flakes.
3. Tsukemono are pickled vegetables, usually served as a side dish.
4. Shioyaki is a grilling method, particularly for fish, involving large quantities of salt and a very hot fire.
5. Nabe refers to several kinds of Japanese hot pots. The name is short for "nabemono", which is literally just "things in a pot".
6. Ponzu is a citrusy sauce used in a lot of Japanese cuisine.
7. Sakamushi is food (usually seafood) that's been steamed in sake.

Chapter 24
The Road to the Meeting

After the bamboo exploded in the stove, I slip back into feverish nightmare, clutching my last remaining bamboo stick as I writhe in pain.

The anger of having something I made burned up. The vexation of that anger not being understood. The despair of having struggled so many times to make a book, yet never finishing one at all. Spreading through it all, a deep and profound weariness that makes me just want to let go of everything.

I don't care about anything anymore. I no longer have the willpower to fight back.

My mother burned my *mokkan*, When she burned the bamboo that Lutz had brought so I could make bamboo writing strips, though, I couldn't summon up any of that anger.

If only I was healthy. If only I was a strong, fit adult.

If I were an adult, I could have skipped over papyrus, clay tablets, and *mokkan*, and gone straight to making rice paper. At least, if I was as strong as Tory and Lutz, strong and fit enough to do real work, I could at least try. With this frail body and these weak child's hands, I can't cut up the wood I'd need in order to make real paper.

If I could just wait until I grew up, then maybe I could finally find my answer. But that's so, so far away. And still, even though I'm talking about growing up, will I really grow as much as everyone else? Hobbled by my lack of strength, will I really grow?

I can't even hope for that.

If everything is truly pointless, isn't it okay for me to just surrender to this fever that rages within me? In a place where I can't get a single book, is my fight to constantly endure living in this filthy, difficult world really worth it?

Maybe it's okay to just disappear.

It was a fleeting, accidental thought, but the fever surged forth anyway, sucking me deeper and deeper. A feeling spreads through me, a vague desire to just stop *thinking*, to let the fever swallow me whole.

I have only one regret. I won't be able to apologize to Lutz.

I won't be able to apologize for the fact that I couldn't use any of the bamboo, despite how hard he'd worked to find a nonflammable material I could use. The words he said to me when he'd left to go get me some bamboo drift through my mind.

"This is just so you'll introduce me to Otto! I'm paying you in advance, so you'd better get healthy! Got it?!"

I haven't fulfilled that promise. Even though he'd put in so much work for the sake of that promise, is it okay for me to just pretend it never happened and run away into the depths of this fever?

Lutz did pay me in advance. It would be so simple to just fade away in this fever, but he gave me those bamboo strips, so I have to get better. I have to introduce him to Otto.

I tell myself that it's for Lutz's sake, and try to push the fever back down. I'd much rather keep my promise than be eaten alive. I need to put my affairs in order. I don't have time for thoughts like the one that flitted through my mind just a little while ago.

That's right, when I died in that earthquake, I wasn't ready for that at a… aaaaaaAAA! What happened to all those things I'd never gotten around to doing! NOOOOOO! I don't want this, I don't want this! This is awful! I can't just *die* here!

All the regrets from my previous life that I'd thought I'd already buried come clearly flashing through my mind. "Even though I died, dying is too much!" I cry, leaping to my feet. Somehow, the fever's been crammed back into a tiny little ball.

I shoved my last life's regrets back into the corner of my mind, and once again resolved not to think about them anymore. Now that I've finally been allowed to leave the house and accompany my father to the gates, I head to the duty room to meet Otto.

“Excuse me, Mister Otto, I asked you a favor, but then I got really sick…”

That’s right: while I was laid out with fever, Otto’s day off came and went, so he and Lutz weren’t able to meet like I had promised.

“Squad Leader told me about how you were sick for five entire days. Are you alright?”
“Yeah!” I say, smiling. “Thanks to everyone.” Otto frowns slightly, staring closely at my face. “Are you really okay? Your color’s quite off.”

The fact that I’m looking kind of pale is actually not the fever’s fault. Rather, it’s because it seems unlikely that I’ll be able to make any paper.

“Aaah~, it’s because there’s something really troubling me that I can’t figure out how to solve. …Mister Otto, can I ask what you’d do in my place?”
“Huh? You want to ask what I’d do if I had your problem?”

He glances at me briefly, his eyes round. Otto, during his time as a trader, must have accumulated so many experiences that I can’t even imagine. There’s a chance he might be able to think of something that I couldn’t.

“Yeah. There’s a thing that I really want right now, but since I’m not healthy and not strong, I can’t make it myself. When I grow up, I think I’d be able to make it, but since my body’s like this, I don’t know if I’m going to be a healthy adult either, or if I’m even going to grow up as much as everyone else. Also, I really can’t wait all that time. Mister Otto, what would you do if you were me?”

Otto nods along as he listens to my explanation. When I finish, he answers immediately, like he hardly needed to think about it at all.

“If you can’t make it yourself,” he says, raising his eyebrows a bit, “why don’t you hire someone who can? Is that all that’s bothering you?”
“Ah?!”

The scales have fallen from my eyes. I’d never even considered the concept of hiring someone to get me the things I wanted. As expected of a trader. I wonder why, though. I was certainly aware of the concept that I could be hired by someone, but it had never crossed my mind that someone could be hired by me.

“…That’s an amazing idea, but I don’t have the money for that.”

“Well, if waiting until you do isn’t possible, then… Hm. If it were me, I’d find someone who could do it, then subtly lead them along until they offered to do it of their own free will. It’s not an easy thing to do, but if they do it without you directly asking, it won’t hurt your budget at all.”

He truly is a former merchant. His explanation is so eloquent, and his smile so genuine, but he’s brilliantly wicked. I must have been happily lead along like that too, huh? My calculation abilities are quite high, but wasn’t I saying that it seemed really easy on the budget to hire an assistant on a salary of slate pencils?

“……I’ll follow your example.”

Taking someone who looks like they could do something, then leading them along until they do it on their own initiative… is it? That seems like it would be really difficult for someone like me.

As I stew in my thoughts, Otto pats me on the shoulder and hands me my slate. He’s clearly telling me that the conversation’s over and that I should get to quietly studying.

“Ah, that’s right! Maine, since you’re feeling better, how about we meet the day after tomorrow, on my day off? We could meet at, hmm… the central plaza would do nicely. How about we meet there around the third bell?”
“I was just thinking about asking you. Thank you so much!”

Out of habit, I jot down a memo in the corner of my slate, reminding myself that we’re meeting after the third bell. When I look back up, Otto is lightly rubbing his chin, smiling so widely that his eyes crinkle. For some reason, that smile sends a chill down my spine, like I’m looking at something dangerous. I reflexively straighten up in my seat and fix my gaze on him.

“Ahh, if it’s someone you’re personally introducing to me, he’s got to be an interesting child. I’m looking forward to an enjoyable day off!”

Did he just say “don’t bring someone boring, because it will ruin my precious day off”, or was it my imagination? Huh? I thought this was going to be a casual meeting so that he could talk about what it was like as a trader, right?

I cover up the sudden turbulence in my heart with a big smile and a nod, then I let my gaze drop down to my slate. I’ve broken out in something of a cold sweat.

This isn't good. I barely have any time before this meeting, and I don't even know what it's really about!

I grind my teeth with worry over how little time I have to prepare. We're meeting the day after tomorrow, so I really have no time. I can't ask, either; since I'm the one who is doing the introductions, I can't really say that I have no clue what the meeting is really for. As I diligently practice my vocabulary, my pencil clacking against the slate, I frantically try to think of what the meeting could possibly mean.

"Maine, we're heading home already."
"Daddy!"

It's rather early for us to be heading home, but when he calls for me I gather up my things and leave the duty room.

"Hey, Daddy. I told Mister Otto that I wanted to introduce him to Lutz, but what does an introduction like that mean?"
"Lutz would be looking around for an apprenticeship at about this time, right? I think that he'd do well to follow his older brothers into their line of work, but does he want to become a merchant?"

A job referral?! No, no, it's not supposed to be that heavy! I mean, a child like me can't possibly be part of anyone's network.

"He just said he wanted to ask some questions…"
"Right, so there's no doubt about it, he wanted a referral so he could ask about an apprenticeship. Your friend seems rather relentless."
"Relentless?"
"Of course. When we talk about hiring an apprentice, we're talking about looking after someone for a very long period of time. Even when you're fully independent, that's the kind of bond that can't ever be completely broken."

This is far more serious than I thought. Lutz is not just looking to ask some questions. It seems that, since he wants to become a trader, he wants Otto, a former trader, to introduce him to somebody.

Aaah, so in other words, the meeting the day after tomorrow is basically a job interview?! How did I have no idea this was going to be such an important meeting?!

After we returned home, I asked my mother and father about apprenticeships in detail. The next day, I load my basket full of cargo before I head to the forest, now fully aware of how serious this meeting is going to be. On our way to the forest, I explain to Lutz about the sad fate of the bamboo strips, and let him know that the meeting with Otto was going to be tomorrow. He sighed when I told him about the bamboo, saying that it's definitely possible to mistake bamboo for vanihitz, and when I told him about the meeting he thanked me with honest delight.

When we reach the forest, everybody scatters to go about their gathering work. I, however, grab Lutz's hand, and drag him over to the river.

"Now then, Lutz. This is a good spot, so let's make sure you're nice and clean all over."
"Huh?"

Otto, because he was once a merchant, keeps a very tidy appearance. I think that it's best for Lutz to give the best possible impression that he can on his first meeting. Since I help Otto with his job so frequently, I am well aware of how calculating he is, just like a merchant. If I were in Lutz's shoes, I would want to show up to this meeting looking absolutely flawless. If he were to judge Lutz as without merit on their very first meeting, there's no way he'd even refer Lutz to a shopkeeper, let alone a trader.

"When you're meeting people for the first time, first impressions are really important! Since we have time to prepare, it's a really good idea to make sure we do everything right. If I were to judge you right now, based on what you look like, I wouldn't think very well of you."
"Even if I wash up, though, I don't think much is going to change."

It would be stellar if Lutz could borrow the nice clothes Ralph wore to his baptism, but I don't know if Ralph will lend them to him. Neither Lutz nor I have much in the way of clothing, so there's not much we can do but wear our usual stuff, but if there's anything that we can improve, I want to improve it. Despite his stubbornness, I take out my simple all-in-one shampoo and get ready start working on his hair, explaining to him about how much of an effect one's appearance has on other people. I intend to polish him until he shines, so I lugged a bucket, some cloth, and a comb out with me to the forest. I don't intend to just wash his hair, though; I want his whole body clean.

I fill the bucket with water from the river and my simple shampoo, then I wash it through Lutz's hair over and over, like I usually do with Tory's. I keep talking with Lutz as I work, somehow feeling like some kind of hairdresser.

"So, Lutz. When you said you wanted to hear about being a trader, you really meant you wanted to *be* a trader, right? And since you want to be a trader, you wanted to be introduced to one?"
"Hm? Yeah."

I dry off his blonde hair with a cloth, which is now much glossier. It's such a beautiful color of gold that I wouldn't mind having it myself. As I comb it out, it only gets more radiant. Holding back my little bit of envy, I keep asking him questions.

"So, Lutz, when you become a trader, what do you want to do? Just travel around?"
"What's up with you all of a sudden?"
"You have to think carefully about it!"
"Why?"
"Mister Otto doesn't know anything about you. You're not being introduced by your parents or a relative who knows you super well, so you're going to have to think of all of these answers yourself."

From what my parents were telling me yesterday, it seems like in this town a child's parents do the introductions when the child starts doing an internship. For that reason, a child's job winds up being somehow related to one of their parents' jobs. For example, my mother works as a dyer, so she introduced Tory to one of her friends from work, and got her an apprenticeship as a seamstress.

When a child has the same profession as their parent, they don't tend to work at the same place, since it would be too easy for them to start relying on their parents too much. However, if the child enters a related profession, then their parents can rest easy knowing that their child is being supervised by someone they know, and the children work seriously because they know their parents will be hearing about it. It's rare for a child like Lutz to want to work in a profession their parents are opposed to, and rarer still for them to be introduced by someone outside the family.

"Mister Otto is being really gracious in meeting you tomorrow, but it's not because he's super nice! He used to be a merchant, so he's a person who thinks of everything in terms of profit and loss. If you show up without having thought any of this through, he's not going to meet you a second time, I don't think."

Tomorrow's meeting is a job interview. For an interview, you need to make sure your appearance is in order and that you know both what you want out of the job and what you think you can bring to it. If you don't, there's a good chance you won't be taken seriously.

"…How about you, Maine?"
"Huh?"
"If someone were to ask you why you wanted to be a merchant, could you tell them immediately?"

Lutz scowls at me with pursed lips, perhaps because he couldn't come up with his own answer immediately.

"Yeah. I want to sell paper. If I can be a merchant's apprentice, then I could find someone to teach how to make paper, then I could have them make it for me."

It's all for my sake, because I want books. Until now, I've been thinking that I shouldn't be relying on others, and I should do whatever I can to make something that I could reasonably substitute for books. However, at this point I am quite frankly at my limit. Now, what I want is for someone who can do all the labor, from beginning to end, while all I do is provide the knowledge. If I turn over the profits I'd ordinarily get for that information, I think I could find someone out there who would make it for me.

"Paper? I thought you wanted books, though?"
"You need paper if you want to make a book. And, you know, I don't think there's anyone else around here besides me who really wants books."
"If you're the only person who wants to buy books, then you're not going to be able to sell any, right?" he says, shocked.
I nod, with a big smile. "Yeah! Selling books isn't going to be that easy, I don't think. However, paper… I think I can make it for cheaper than parchment, so I think I'd be able to sell it. At the very least, I think there might be a merchant out there who would take me on once I showed him how to make it."
"…Huh. You've really thought this through, Maine. I'll have to think about it too."
"Since you're only Mister Otto's assistant's friend, it'll be really easy for him to turn you down. If you can clearly say what you want to do with yourself, though, and you can make them believe that it'll be profitable for them, then won't there be a merchant out there who'd take you on?"

While Lutz sits, deep in thought, scowling at the surface of the river, I use the time to wash up the rest of his body. We don't have the time to sit here and do nothing while we think.

Well before the third bell sounds, Lutz and I arrive at the town square, me looking like I always do and Lutz looking far nicer than usual. I had been hoping that Ralph would lend Lutz his nice clothing, but it seems that Ralph didn't want them to get dirty and refused.

"Hey, we're meeting at the third bell, right? Aren't we way too early?"
"That's okay! Being late would be absolutely fatal. Once we get there, we can sit and talk for a while, and it'll be time for the meeting before you know it."

The temple rings its bell regularly, in intervals of somewhere between two and three hours. I'm sure that being late to a meeting in a world without actual timepieces isn't as bad as I made it sound, but I want to avoid any sort of negative impression from having the two of us be late to a meeting we requested.

"That reminds me, yesterday, my mom was all, 'what did you do to your hair?', and she made a really big deal about it!"

With a deplorable look on his face, he tugs at a lock of his glossy blond hair. I understand exactly what his mother was thinking. If my son suddenly had smooth, shiny hair after a day out, I'd be curious too.

"Beauty is always the thing a woman is most fascinated by, after all."
"I told her you did it, so she should ask you if she wants to know."
"What?!"

I shrink back suddenly, my voice crying out in incredulity, a headache instantly forming as I realize that I'll never be free of Carla's unceasing barrage of questions once she gets a hold of me.

"I'll tell her how to make it so she can do it herself. I don't have very much of it anymore."
"…Ah, sorry. If it's that bad, you didn't need to use it on me, you know?"
"That's okay. You're always the one helping me out, after all."

I don't mind using some of my simple shampoo on Lutz at all, since he's been constantly assisting me, but I absolutely would mind giving it to Carla. After all, I'm already having to suffer with the fact that I can only wash my hair with shampoo once out of every five days and have to use plain water on the rest.

"But, still…"
"If it really bothers you, I wouldn't mind if you helped me make some more. I'm way too weak, so I'm not very good at pressing oil."
"What, is that it?"

As we talk, Otto comes into view near the entrance to the plaza. When he sees the two of us, he smiles broadly, but even from this far away I immediately realize what just happened.

Ahh, this really was a test.

Given that he gave such a fuzzy time as "around the third bell" while giving me that dangerous smile that put me so on edge, this really must have been a test to see whether or not we'd arrive well before the bell actually rang. Otto purses his lips just a little, then turns towards another part of the plaza and gives a big wave. Another man comes into view, and the two of them start walking towards us. Beads of cold sweat trickle down my spine, and I unconsciously grip Lutz's hand tightly.

"They're here, Lutz. Remember, introduce yourself first."
"R… right."

Judging from how the two of them are talking quietly to each other as they approach, I know that this is Otto's friend, a merchant. He briefly glances at me, and I meet his eyes. They gleam with a sharp light, and I feel like my value is being appraised.

Nobody told me that Otto wasn't going to be the only interviewer!
Aargh, it's Lutz's interview, but I'm the one getting super stressed, here!

Chapter 25
Meeting With the Merchant

Making Lutz wash up, despite his protests, and having him make a last-minute effort to think up answers to the questions he might be asked in the interview, was absolutely the correct decision. Otto and his friend both have meticulous personal appearances, a significant cut above the rest of the people coming and going through the central plaza. As I thought, it would have been much better if Lutz and I could have gotten our hands on our older sibling's nice clothes.

Their clothing design is strange… no, their clothing design isn't what I'm used to seeing. The many layers of fabric draped over them show no signs of either stains or patches at all. This is not something I see very often at all in my daily life, where it's only natural to use the barest minimum of cloth and thread at all times. Based solely on his clothes, I imagine that Otto's friend is someone who makes quite a bit of money. His garments, his demeanor, that calculating look in his eyes, everything about him is vastly different than the shopkeepers I see in the town market.

When I say he looks like a merchant who makes a lot of money, I do not mean that it seems like he's the owner of an old, well-established shop. Rather, he moves with the force of the president of a venture firm in the middle of a tremendous rise. At first glance, he has curly, pale, milk-tea colored hair and gentle-looking features, but his red eyes overflow with self-confidence, and they glitter with the raw ferocity of a carnivorous beast.

"Hey there, Maine!" says Otto. "And you must be Lutz?"
"Good morning, Mister Otto. Yes, this is my friend Lutz. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today."

I'm not entirely sure what the most suitable way to greet him is, so I tap my chest with my fist twice in a salute, like I always do. Otto returns the salute, so I think that I didn't at least make a big mistake.

"Good morning, sirs, my name is Lutz. It is nice to meet you."

Lutz seems very nervous, but he refuses to give in to the intimidation of their discerning stares, and he recites the unfamiliar greeting without stammering and without a quiver in his voice. The first hurdle has been cleared.

"Benno," says Otto, "this is Maine, the girl who works as my assistant. She's my squad leader's daughter. Maine, this is Benno, an acquaintance from when I worked as a trader."
"Mister Benno, sir," I say, "My name is Maine. It is nice to meet you."

Despite the fact that I compulsively want to bow as I introduce myself, I don't forget that it's not customary in this culture to do so, and instead give him my best smile.

"You're quite polite!" says Benno. "I am Benno, nice to meet you." He looks over to Otto. "…She's quite well-mannered for such a small child."
"She's not as young as she looks," he clarifies. "She's six years old."

I probably look somewhere between three and four years old. Benno frowns slightly, then the corners of his mouth turn up in amusement as he glances over at Otto.

"…Your assistant's a girl who hasn't even been baptized?"
"Ahh, well, how should I put this. I'm teaching her to read and write so that she can become my assistant in the future."
"I thought you said before that she was already working as your assistant, did you not?"
"…Don't worry about it too much."

As they banter harmlessly back and forth, I notice that there's a lot of information being conveyed purely through subtext. Chills run down my spine. Are Lutz and I even capable of handling an interview with these people? What the hell. When he brought up that I haven't been baptized yet, I got the keen feeling that he was intimating that I wasn't actually capable of doing the work, and that Otto was simply going easy on me.

With a dubious expression on his face, he stares at a spot just above my eyes for a little bit, then opens his mouth to speak.

"I'm very curious about something that I'd like to ask about first, is that alright?"
"Yes, sir, what is it?"
"What's that rod you have in your hair?"

I see. Asking such a silly question after rejecting me would be hard, wouldn't it? Is this man perhaps already intending to dismiss me?

Forcing a smile onto my face, I quickly undo my hairpin and hand it over to him as he carefully studies me, seeming to get a lot of information out of every little move I make.

"This is a *'hairpin'*. I use it to keep my hair in place."

Otto seems to be curious as well, so they study my hairpin closely, looking it up and down, turning it around, and giving it careful scrutiny.

It's just a stick, you know? There's no gimmick or trick to it, you know?

"…It's just a stick, huh."
"Yes, it's a stick that I had my father whittle for me."
"And you're able to keep your hair in place with just this?"
"Yes, sir."

I take the hairpin back from him, then put my hair back up into its usual style. I gather up the half-up part of my hair, twist it around the hairpin, spin it until it's tight, then with a quick jerk fix everything in place. It's something I do every day, so I'm very practiced at doing it.

"Ohhhh… impressive!"

Lutz and Otto stare at me with wide eyes. This is the first time they've seen me as I put up my hair like this. Benno touches my hair, frowning slightly.

"Say, Maine. Your hair's pretty impressive too. What do you put in it?"

His touch may be careful as he studies my hair, but the discerning gleam in his eyes is breathtakingly sharp. Between the glitter of profit in his eyes and the ferocity of the women's questions back on baptism day, I can clearly see that my simple shampoo could be quite the valued commodity.

"It's a combination of relatively common things, but the details are my secret."
"Boy, you use the same thing?"

“Maine insisted on making my hair look nice yesterday…”

Ah, Mister Benno, did I hear your tongue click just now? Did you think that it would be easy to get us to teach you how it’s made, since we’re merely children? How unfortunate. I’m not going to play my high-value cards in a little skirmish like that; Lutz’s interview hasn’t even started yet.

Benno and I exchange smiles, mine sweet, his stiff. Otto lets out a little sigh, running his fingers back through his hair.

“Well then, Lutz. You said that you wanted to become a trader?”

The main question has arrived. Next to me, I hear Lutz’s breath catch as he gulps nervously. I sneakily reach over and squeeze his hand reassuringly, quietly cheering him on.

You’ve thought about this long and hard since last night, right? Now is the time to stand tall, Lutz! Tell us of your ambitions, and seize your victory!

“Ah, yes. I w—”
“Give it up.”
“Eh?”

Lutz was stopped before he could even start telling us what he wanted. In my heart, I scream. He worked so hard to come up with that answer, at least hear him out! Otto, however, looks like he’s swallowed a bug as he looks down at Lutz.

“Only an idiot would throw away his citizenship like that.”
“…Mister Otto, what do you mean by citizenship?”

The question slips out of my mouth before I even have time to think about it. This is the first time I’ve heard that word used here. I know that citizenship, in this context, would be the set of basic rights afforded to those who live in this city. Just like how you can still enjoy the rights granted to you by the Japanese constitution even if you haven’t studied them, there seem to be certain obvious rights granted to the citizens of this town. However, I have absolutely no idea what they could be.

“It means the right to live in the city. It’s also something that records your identity. When you turn seven and go to the temple to be baptized, your name will be

registered, letting you work in the city, get married here, rent a house, and so on. The ways you can interact with the city are vastly different when you do or do not have citizenship. Outsiders can register at the temple, be granted citizenship, and settle down here, but doing so is ludicrously expensive."
"Mister Otto, did you have to pay?"
He nods. "Yes, that's right," he says, smiling bitterly, perhaps in recollection.
Benno, next to him, points at Otto and laughs. "This guy sold everything he had so that he could stay here and marry Corinna!"
"I wanted to open up a shop here and continue selling things here if I could, but buying citizenship was an enormous effort that left me nearly broke."

I don't know how much money the average trader has saved up, but it looks like it's not enough to cover buying citizenship, paying for a wedding, and opening a shop.

"On top of that, a life on the road is vastly different compared to living in a town. Tell me, Lutz, do you have any idea what it means to live your life while riding on the back of a cart?"
"…No," he replies, slowly shaking his head.

It takes only two hours to walk across this town from end to end, so children in this town move around almost exclusively by walking. Lutz might have ridden in a hand-drawn wagon before, but he's probably never ridden in a horse-drawn cart before, and most likely has no idea at all what it's like to actually travel by cart.

"Let's take water, for example. When you need it right now, where do you get it?"
"From the well."
"Of course, right? But when you're on the road, there aren't any nice wells that are built for you. You'd have to start searching for places you can find water."
"There's rivers…"

When we go to the forest, we use the river as a source of water, so that's the first thing that pops into Lutz's head. However, when you're on the road, you aren't at all guaranteed to be traveling near a river. Plus, since paper is so expensive and hard to get, how many traders actually have maps to go by?

"Lutz," I say, "when you're just starting out as a trader, you're not going to know where those rivers are. There's no way you'll be able to follow the rivers all the time…"
"It's just like she says. That's why traders generally travel the same routes all the time. When you do, you make friends and contacts in the towns you visit, you can deal in

information, and you start to learn where you can find water and the safe roads to travel on. Then, you teach that to your kids, and those kids take those same routes on when you retire. When you spend your days riding in a cramped cart like that, there's no room for another person in there. …Also, and this is the most important part, is where traders eventually end up. Lutz, do you know what a trader longs for, more than anything?"
"…"
"Citizenship."
"Huh?!"
"They want to give up their difficult lifestyle, and someday settle down in a town somewhere. They want to open a shop in a town and conduct their trade in safety. That's what a trader dreams of. You're not going to find a single trader who'll take you on when you already have citizenship. If you absolutely want to do it, then you'll have to do it all on your own. There's no apprenticeship program for traders."

If citizenship is every trader's dream, then Otto's already fulfilled his. It seems like he really wanted to open a store here in the city, but I don't know why a merchant like him would give up on that and become a soldier instead.

"Mister Otto, why did you decide to become a soldier?"
"Wait," interjects Benno "no, don't… ngh!"

Otto puts his hand over Benno's mouth to silence him, then grandly, majestically states his answer.

"It was all so that I can marry Corinna!"
"Ooh," I say, "I want to hear everything about this!"
Benno, in a panic, tries to shush me. "*I* don't want to hear *anything* about this, young lady."

Otto, however, starts his story, his eyes glittering. "That's right," he says, "this happened was just after I became an adult. I was passing through this town when I caught a glimpse of Corinna, and it was love at first sight! It was like an arrow through my heart, or a flash of divine inspiration, but all I could see in that moment was her. I couldn't marry anyone else but her, I thought, so at that very moment I started to woo her."
"…Mister Otto, that's unexpectedly passionate of you."

This former merchant, who hides his darkly calculating nature underneath a gentle smile, seems to be a passionate romantic. The color of his black tea-colored hair and his light brown eyes gives him such a composed, honest image that I never could have imagined he could pour out such passion.

“She was just so charming that I couldn’t help it. So, I resolutely made my advances, but at first she rejected me. You see, she’s a seamstress famous for her excellent skills, and on top of that she treasures the bonds she has with everyone here. She told me that she couldn’t live her life on the road.”

Ahh, of course. If you have a stable life, with enough skill and enough regular customers to earn a steady income, you won’t be able to abandon it all for an unstable life of travel. Plus, looking at it from Corinna’s perspective, wouldn’t a trader suddenly walking up to her and trying to woo her seem very suspicious? Surely she’d be wondering if that was some kind of con, wouldn’t she?

I nod along intently as I listen while Otto’s love story starts to heat up. He starts putting more and more passion in his voice, and his gestures start getting bigger and bigger.

“Corinna said she planning on marrying a man from this city, and a shock like thunder came crashing through my brain. The thought of Corinna marrying another man was completely unimaginable! After frantically trying to figure out what I needed to do, I immediately marched over to the temple and obtained my citizenship.”
“Huh? Wait a minute. Weren’t you letting your passions run a little too wild?”

I look over at Benno, wondering if Otto’s actions were at all normal by this world’s standards. Benno has his hand to his head, squeezing on his temples, an exhausted expression on his face.

“…See, even a child can see it! On top of that, the money he spent on his citizenship was all of the money he had been saving to go back to the city where his parents lived and open up a shop, right?”
“What?!”

He then explains that if you purchase citizenship in the town where your parents had citizenship, the price would be reduced by more than half, so the rest of the money could be used to open up a shop. For a trader to spend so much time amassing enough money to retire from his uncertain existence and move up to owning a shop, then

spontaneously spend it all in one go on a woman he had just met… those are not the actions of a calculating merchant, but of a wild stallion who has eyes for nothing but his beloved.

"I wanted to open a shop in this town, but I didn't have enough money left over to afford one, and I didn't yet have any connections in this town that would lend me enough money. I had to quit my job as a merchant, then became a soldier in order to show Corinna my dedication to live in this town. I asked a favor of the squad leader who I'd made friends with after seeing him every time I came to this town, and he got me hired for a position that primarily involved a lot of paperwork. …By the way, when I bought my citizenship, became a soldier, and proposed, Corinna was shocked!"

Well, uh, it is rather shocking. I don't think a single young woman of marriageable age exists who *wouldn't* be shocked if someone were to sell everything they have, buy a citizenship, and become a soldier just because she told him that she couldn't live a life on the road. I want to hear things from Corinna's viewpoint, whether she thought Otto should have reined himself in or whether her chest tightened as she wondered what about her could be so captivating. I'm absolutely sure her story is going to be very different from Otto's.

"I kept chasing after her for many days, until I finally married her, which felt a little like being adopted into her family. She was so cute when she laughingly told me she couldn't help falling for me after all that time! And, now…"

After that, he starts going on and on about how adorable his wife is. There was no stopping him. I really want him to *not* use the first-class sales pitch skills he honed during his career as a merchant when describing his wife. Lutz is left completely flabbergasted by the deluge of praise. I've heard of husbands so devoted that they'd never lay eyes on another woman, but I thought it was fathers who were so prone to exaggeration like this. These exaggerations, though, are pretty harmless.

What should I do about this? I had no idea Otto was this kind of person.

I look over at Benno, silently pleading for help. Our eyes met for a brief instant, then he clapped a hand on Otto's shoulder and sighed lightly. He looks like he's had practice at this.

"Otto, you stopped talking about being a trader a while ago, you know! That's enough about your wife, get back to the main topic."

“Ahem! Sorry. So, as I was saying, give up on being a trader.”

I want to make a sarcastic quip about his use of “as I was saying”, but I force myself to keep my mouth shut. He may have gotten significantly derailed, but now I know that there’s no apprenticeship system for traders, the life of a trader is fraught with difficulty, the citizenship Lutz and I possess is extremely important, and that drowning in love is absolutely terrifying.

After being so plainly told to give up, Lutz gloomily hangs his head, looking so sad as to be almost pitiable. He’d spent so long thinking about his reasons for becoming a trader, but before he could get a single word out, he was told that his dream was impossible. After being beaten over the head about how difficult a trader’s life is (and how awesome Otto’s wife is), it’s only natural to be so sad.

“…Lutz,” says Otto, “this was Maine’s suggestion, but instead of becoming a trader, how about doing your apprenticeship under a merchant? You’ll eventually be able to leave the town on your own to go purchase supplies.”
“Maine?!”

Lutz raises his head abruptly, turning to look at me. Rage flares up in his green eyes, accusing me of having known all along that they were going to tell him he couldn’t be a trader.

“I thought that you should really hear it from the mouth of an actual trader,” I say. “I’ve lived in this town all my life, so would you even believe me if I told you to stop?”
“…Ah.”

From the look on his face, I’ve hit the bullseye. He looks away, seemingly lamenting about how unfair life is.

“When I asked Mister Otto about it, I thought that being a trader sounded way too difficult, so I started wondering is there was a job that would let you travel out of town that your parents wouldn’t object to. Also, I might have just heard about this now, but I think you should stop thinking about letting go of your citizenship so that you could be a trader.”
“…I guess you’re right.”

Now that he's heard Otto say it, it looks like he's really letting it sink in. The fanciful tales he heard from people traveling from out of town truly are entirely different from the harsh reality of being a trader.

"Daddy told me that Mister Otto has connections to some of the merchants in this city, so I asked him if he'd be willing to introduce you to someone, if you wanted it. It's your choice, though, you know?"
"…Oh, wow. You've really thought this through."

Benno looks up, letting out a deep breath. I look up as well, watching him closely. If Lutz wants to be introduced to a merchant, then the opponent he needs to beat isn't Otto. It's Benno.

"So," he says, "it seems we've been introduced, but… kid, do you want to become a merchant?"
"Yes, sir!"

Lutz nods, and Benno smiles widely, his reddish-brown eyes narrowing. The light-hearted atmosphere from when Otto was bragging about his wife has completely blown away. Not a wisp of it remains. Benno looks down at Lutz like a carnivorous beast, his cruel eyes fixed on the opponent he will beat into submission.

"Hmm! Well now, what will you sell? If you become a merchant, what kind of things do you want to sell?"
"Um?!"

It's only natural to be asked questions about your aspirations during a job interview, but the ambitions that Lutz spent yesterday contemplating were all about being a trader. To be suddenly forced to spin those around into reasons for wanting to be a merchant's apprentice instead is no trivial matter at all.

"I'm asking you what you want to do when you become a trader, and if you can even do it."
"Um, I…"

Eeek! This is a very high-stakes interview to be giving to a child who isn't even old enough to be baptized!

I want to say that he's not being as cruel as he seems, but for a merchant, taking on another apprentice means incurring a lot of additional expense. Also, Lutz is only the friend of Otto's assistant. Benno doesn't have any obligation to take on such a large burden. If Lutz doesn't show his willpower, his determination, his knowledge about what goods he might be able to sell, and his ability to be of some use to Benno, then nobody could possibly complain if Benno cuts off the conversation right now. From Benno's standpoint, the fact that he agreed to this meeting is something that Lutz should be grateful for.

"If you don't have anything, this conversation is over."

Lutz drops his head slightly, chewing nervously on his lips. I don't know if I should say anything. I don't know if it'll be a lifeboat for him, or a step down a painful path he shouldn't tread, but it's ultimately up to him. In a low voice only he can hear, I quietly ask him a question.

"…Could you make my paper?"
"Yeah." "Hmm?"

Lutz suddenly looks up, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tight. I can feel him trembling, but the firm glare he fixes on Benno burns with raw ferocity.

"Of course I've got something I want to do! I'm going to make everything that Maine comes up with!"
"Yeah," I say, "he's always been helping me."
"Maine can barely do anything by herself, so I'm going to do it for her."

Lutz, that was a great job. You said it perfectly. Benno's eyes have gone wide.

I haven't the slightest idea if any of this happened because I was the one dragging Lutz along or if he was the one dragging me along, but if Lutz is going to take on all of the things that I can't do, then I'll take on all of the things that he can't do either.

Unlike Lutz, I already have *plenty* of experience with taking entrance examinations and applying for job interviews.

I calmly look up at Benno, a smile on my face. I take a slow breath and let it out gently, getting my breathing in order, then open my mouth to speak.

“I have an idea for a kind of paper that I’d like to sell, one that doesn’t use any animal skin. I believe that I can get its production cost down below that of parchment, so I think that it will be a very profitable good to sell.”

As I talk, Benno’s face turns sour, like he’s swallowed a particularly bitter bug. When he turns to look at me, his eyes glow with an even more ferocious light then he did when he was staring down Lutz.

“…You want to become a merchant as well?” he asks, in a low voice that almost sounds like a growl.
“Yes, sir!” I nod, smiling brightly. “It’s my number two aspiration, though.”

Next to Benno, Otto doubtfully tilts his head to the side.

“Is your number one aspiration doing paperwork at the gate?”
“No, sir, it’s to become a *'librarian'*.”

As soon as I say it, all three of them look at me in unison, identically dubious expressions on each of their faces. It looks like they really didn’t understand that word.

“…I’ve never heard of that.”
“I mean that I want to manage the books in a place that has a lot of them.”

After I finish my simple explanation of a librarian’s job, Benno suddenly bursts out in riotous laughter.

“A… ahahaha! There’s no way you can do a job like that if you’re not a member of the nobility!”
“…Really? I thought that was the case.”

Those damn noblemen.

If it’s a fundamental truth that it’s only the nobility that has books, then I think it’s only natural for the librarian who manages those books to be a member of the nobility as well. I never had any real expectations about it, but this reminder of my difference in social status is still really irritating.

“Even so, a paper that isn’t parchment, huh… Do you have any of it?”

When he glances back down at me, his eyes are bright and alert. Most likely, thoughts of how much profit could be made if I really could make paper without using parchment are tumbling around in his head.

“I haven’t made any yet, sir.”
“Then don’t be ridiculous.”

He may be telling me not to say ridiculous things, but there’s no mistaking that his interest has been piqued. I think we’re just one word away from finding some common ground. I smile even wider.

“If actual paper is what you want to see, then we’ll make it. Our baptismal ceremony is summer of next year, so by spring we’ll have a prototype of my paper design, and then I hope that you’ll be the judge of whether or not we can actually make it.”
“…Alright then.”

I have somehow managed to wrangle an extension out of Benno, despite the fact that he came here with the full intention of dismissing us outright. This truly is an amazing victory.

“Thank you very much, Mister Benno.”
“We still haven’t settled on anything yet.”
“Even so, I’m grateful that you’ve given us the chance to prove ourselves.”

All that’s left is up to Lutz’s persistence. I think that he’s going to work extra-hard, knowing that my job is at stake as well. It may have been sudden, but I can’t help but smile at the fact that it suddenly looks like I’ll be able to obtain real paper.

“Lutz, let’s do our best!”
“Yeah!”

Lutz and I also convey our gratitude to Otto, with big smiles. Thanks to him, Lutz has given up on his dream of becoming a trader, and has taken his first step towards becoming a merchant’s apprentice. Out of all of the outcomes I’d considered, this is by far the best one.

“Mister Otto, thank you very much for introducing us to Mister Benno.”
“You made my day off very fun! Looking forward to seeing you at the gates next time!”

“Me too!”

We somehow managed to get passing marks from Otto as well. I let a big sigh of relief. I pick up on the hint in Otto’s last remark, realizing that it’s time to break up the meeting, and start to leave the town square with Lutz.

…Ah, I almost forgot.

I stop walking after just one step, then turn back around to call after Otto and Benno as they walk away.

“Um! Mister Otto, Mister Benno, I have something to ask!”
“Sure, what is it?”
“Do either of you know of a sickness that can cause a fever that can suddenly spread throughout your body, then shrink back down again?”

Between Otto, who has been to many places in his life, and Benno, who has many connections around the area, it’s possible that one of them might have heard of something like the fevers I have.

“It felt like it got big enough to swallow me whole, but then I frantically fought against it and forced it back into a tiny shape. I’m sorry that this is such a subjective description…”
“Who knows? I haven’t heard of it,” says Otto, loosely shaking his head.

Benno looks off to the side, glances down at the ground, then slowly starts shaking his head too.

“…I don’t know.”

If this is something that even those two don’t know about, then I don’t think I can find someone who knows anything more. My illness must really be rare, then.

…Could this disease actually be extremely dangerous?

As I entertain this touch of anxiety, the meeting comes to a close.

Chapter 26
Interlude: My Assistant

My name is Otto. I am the man who loves my beautiful, adorable wife Corinna the most in the whole wide world.

Her hair is the color of cream, and the irises of her eyes are gray. Each of her pale colors adds to the gentle, pure atmosphere that floats around her. The bridge of her nose may be long, but she's so cute when she worries about how the plumpness of her cheeks makes her look a little bit baby-faced. She's so lovely when she laughingly tells me that she doesn't know what she's going to do about me. She smells great when I hold her close, her huge breasts squishing up against me. She's the best.

I'll shout it from the top of the world! My Corinna is the best woman in the world!

Today, at the behest of my helper Maine, I met Lutz, a young boy who said that he wanted to become a trader. I gently hit him with the harsh truth of reality, leaving his dreams smashed into tiny pieces.

"I'm home, Corinna!" I call out. "Benno's with me too."
"Welcome back, dear. …So, even after bullying children that haven't even been baptized, you can still come home with a smile like that."
"She's so cute even when she's pouting!"

I unintentionally blurt out my inner thoughts. Corinna looks at me in shock, then lets out a long sigh. This is a regular sort of shock, so I just shrug my shoulders and explain myself. I really had no intention to bully those children, so it's not like what I did could be considered bullying. All I did was talk to a child who still believed in fairy tales and told him about how reality truly works.

"I didn't have a choice. There's nothing good about becoming a trader, after all. Sure, I had to shatter his dreams completely, but it was for his own good."
"I guess so, but…"

Corinna looks down at the ground with her gray eyes, her eyebrows knitting together in concern and pity. Seeing my Corinna worrying about another man, even if he's just a child, makes my heart tremble, though just a little bit.

"You're such a kind person, Corinna. You're so worried about a child you haven't even met…" I grab onto her shoulders and hug her close, just ready to kiss her.
"You're blocking the door, Otto," says Benno, crossly, from behind me. "Actually go in the house, please."

Corinna, looking a little flustered, shoves me off to the side and shows Benno in.

"Come in, big brother! …You look quite depressed, are you maybe feeling guilty about rejecting those children?"

Deep lines are carved between Benno's knotted eyebrows, and not a single trace of his usual affable demeanor can be found in his expression at all. Contrary to what Corinna is thinking, Benno actually didn't wind up rejecting Lutz, so, of course, his gloomy mood has nothing to do with guilt at all.

"No, no, Corinna, it's not that," I say. "He tried to drive away Lutz after the boy said he wanted to become a merchant's apprentice, but Lutz wouldn't be driven away. Maine set forth a few conditions, and Benno actually accepted them. She completely turned the tables on him. That's why he's depressed."
"Otto…" says Benno in a low, warning voice. I ignore him and head into the house with Corinna.

He must be feeling the effects of being done in by a child. This is great. Savor this, Benno. This is how I feel every time Maine does something shocking to me.

As we walk towards the parlor, I embrace Corinna from behind, and kiss her lovely cream-colored hair over and over. Benno clenches his fist, telling us that we should wait to do that until he's not around. Even though I want to be mad at him for interrupting our couple's time, but if I were to actually say that in front of Corinna, she'd tell me to cut it out immediately, so I bite my tongue.

The parlor is typically where Corinna entertains her customers. She works hard to keep it very clean so that she can use it whenever a customer may happen to come by. In the center of the room stands a round table, unlike the one in the dining room. Four chairs are set around it. Since the use of cloth for things besides just clothing is the

mark of a wealthy individual, this parlor has much more cloth in it than any other room in the house. For instance, display shelves are arranged along the right wall, showing the patterns that Corinna can make, On the left wall, a vividly colored tapestry has been hung, sewed together out of leftover cloth.

I don't usually come into this room, since I rarely need to, but it's fun for me to just look at it, since it's decorated with Corinna's handiwork. I sit down at the table opposite from Benno, broadly grinning at him.

"Well! That really was an unexpected turn of events! I never would have thought that Benno would make a compromise…"
"What? Benno did?" asks Corinna, her gray eyes going wide. "Otto, you have to tell me everything!"

She's so cute when she pesters me with those wide eyes. Also, after she sits down on the chair next to me, she scoots it just a little bit closer. She really is adorable.

It's rare for Corinna to pester me like this, so I cheerfully recount the day's events to her, applauding Maine in my heart for her efforts.

When I finish with my story, Corinna looks at her brother, her eyes wide.

"He made himself look as good as he could before he met you, then showed up in the plaza to wait for you long before the bell actually rang… Benno, weren't you losing that fight from the very beginning?"
"Shut up…"

Benno's mood is only growing more and more foul. Even as he pours the liquor Corinna had brought out down his throat, the knot between his eyebrows doesn't loosen even the slightest. Both maintaining at least a minimum level of personal grooming and making sure you arrive earlier than the person you're requesting a favor of to avoid making them wait are obvious, basic things for a merchant. Benno thought that he could see how prepared Lutz actually was based on whether or not he could do those basic things, but Lutz actually cleared both of those hurdles.

It was, however, probably Maine's doing.

From expression that flashed across her face the moment she saw us enter the plaza, I can't think of anything else. Today's victor was clearly Maine, and, thanks to that, I got to see a scene where Benno was forced to make a compromise.

"Well! Thanks to Maine, today was much more fun than I thought it was going to be!"
"You're talking about your squad leader's daughter, right? The one you said was extremely bright."
"Yeah, that's right. Even though it's been nearly half a year since I made her my assistant, I still don't have a good grip on her. She's so peculiar that I can't help but wonder how a child like her could have been raised."

As a trader, I went to many different places and met with many different people of many different social positions, and Maine's peculiarities stand out from all of them. Benno, my companion for the day, has similar experience; as a merchant, he knows many people of note. If you think of my breadth of knowledge as wide, but shallow, Benno's is narrow, but deep.

"Hey, Otto," he says. "What *was* that?"
"I told you already, that was my assistant."
"No, I get that, but don't lie to me: was that really a soldier's daughter?"
"No doubt about that at all… but I, for one, think it's strange."
"How so?" asks Corinna, head tilted to one side in wonder.

Usually, when I tell her about my day, I mention a few things about Maine, like how she's smart, or how she's frail, and so on, but this is the first time I've ever described her as strange. After all, I think she's so strange that you can't truly understand just how strange she is unless you see her for yourself.

"First of all, her appearance is unusual. She keeps herself so tidy that you'd never think she was ever a soldier's daughter. The clothes she wears aren't all that different than what you see on other children like her; old, worn-out, and patched in places. Her skin and hair, though, are so clean that they shine. The squad leader is a man that looks just about the same as all the other soldiers, but neither of his daughters are slightly dirty like he is, and their hair is glossy."
"Surely their mother must be helping them take care of their skin and hair, then?"

Corinna was raised as the daughter of a wealthy merchant, so even if she's seen how poor people live, she really can't truly grasp what it's really like. Putting effort into

taking care of your skin and hair requires time, money, and supplies. Poor people have none of those things in abundance at all.

"…I last saw their mother this past winter, but she didn't seem like she was taking the initiative to put in that kind of effort. She is, though, so beautiful that she's really wasted on the squad leader."

During a clear winter's day, Maine stayed at the gates for a while so that her family could collect paru. When her mother came to pick up her daughter, I didn't get the impression that she was remarkably tidy. All I really noticed was that she looked a lot like Maine, and that she was beautiful.

"Ohhh, is that so?" says Corinna, an amused twinkle in her gray eyes. It's very rare for me to compliment other women. "Of course, you're the best woman in my whole wide world, and that will never, ever change!"
"Yes, yes, dear, that's quite enough. …So, Benno, did Maine seem strange to you too?"

Benno puts his glass down, leans back in his chair, and looks up at a beam holding up the ceiling. Slowly, he takes a breath.

"Yeah. Her hair, the color of the night sky, was so glossy that it almost seemed to glow, her skin was an untarnished white, and her hands did not look like those of someone who lives a life of manual labor. Her teeth were white, too. The beat-up dress she was wearing matched her so poorly that it almost looked forced, no matter how I looked at it."
"Wait… hair so glossy that it almost seemed to glow?! What did she do to make it do that?!"
"Huh?" I say, blinking in surprise. "Corinna, but you're already so beautiful just as you are!"
"Quiet, Otto! I'm talking to my brother."

To women, it seems that the shininess of one's hair is a matter of utmost importance. It's rare for Corinna to express this much interest in something that's not related to sewing.

"It looked like she'd put something in it, but she didn't tell me what exactly she'd used."
"Benno, she said it was a secret," I added.
"Otto, do you think you'll be able to ask her about it?" asked Corinna.

"…Yes, but she's probably going to be on guard from now on, so I don't think I'll be able to get an answer."

Corinna wants to know what Maine does to her hair. For Corinna's sake, I'll ask Maine about it the next time I see her, even though I'm certain it's useless.

"Aside from her hair," I say, "I think that the reason her hands are so clean is because her body is so small and weak that she can't be of much help around the house. The whiteness of her skin is probably because she gets sick at a moment's notice, so she doesn't go outside very often and thus doesn't get a lot of sun. Honestly, she's only really started to be healthy enough to go outside since this spring."
"…Now that you mention it, we cancelled the meeting last time because she had a fever, didn't she?"

I nod, unable to keep off my face a faint expression of irritation as I remember how jumpy and distracted the squad leader was during his daughter's five-day fever.

"So, in other words, Maine's appearance is due to her weak constitution?" asks Corinna. "That's not quite enough to call her strange, isn't it?"

It seems that Corinna has decided this isn't that big of a deal after hearing all of this. She shrugs her shoulders, looking like she's rapidly losing interest.

Benno shakes his head. "No, it's not just her appearance that's strange. What stood out to me was her posture and her speech. …Those were something that she couldn't have mastered without very good upbringing at home. Otto, don't tell me that she had such a strict upbringing because her parents are disgraced former members of the nobility?"

I wouldn't draw that conclusion about the squad leader's family circumstances. If you look at the rest of Maine's family, it's quite obvious whether or not they have any connections to the aristocracy.

"The squad leader has one more daughter, who is perfectly ordinary. Her hair is unusually glossy and her skin is relatively clean, though, but that's it. She's not so far beyond her peers as Maine is."

Benno nods slightly, then looks over to Corinna.

“Corinna,” he says, “that girl doesn’t just look strange. She had the courage to maintain eye contact when I was staring her down, was crafty enough to protect her advantages with regards to the secret behind her hair, was able to feed me a wild bluff without anything to back it up, and even negotiated terms… none of those things are things I’d expect from a child that hasn’t even been baptized.”
“A child that doesn’t flinch away under *your* glare, Benno?!” asks Corinna, her eyes wide. “That child is strange. Without any doubt, that child is strange.”“

When Benno starts to lay on the coercion, his eyes grow sharp like a predator’s. Benno is the eldest son of the family and Corinna is the youngest daughter, so when they lost their father while Corinna was still very young, Benno stepped in to raise her in his place. He scolded her a lot whenever she got immature, and the fact that even to this day she still averts her eyes is a sign of how scary Benno can get.

"A~ah, her memory and calculation ability are also amazing!” I say. “Now that I think about it, when I gave her my slate, she surprised me again. She picked up the slate pencil and started writing immediately, without anyone even needing to show her how to hold it! It’s almost like she already knew how to write.”
“Did she maybe learn by watching you?” asks Corinna, her head tilted to the side in thought.

She glances down briefly, noticing that my glass is empty, and pours me another. I take a mouthful, hesitating about how I should answer. It’s true that I showed her how by example, but…

“Writing isn’t something that you can just simply start doing after watching someone else, especially with how smoothly she was writing right from the start. I train all of the new apprentice soldiers in how to write every season, so I know how difficult it is to learn. When they first start, they can barely draw a line, let alone write a single letter.”
“Ahh, that’s right…”

Corinna has instructed quite a few apprentices of her own in a variety of things, so she knows how rare it is for someone to be able to learn how to do something just by watching.

“Her calculation abilities are also very strange. She said that she learned how to read numbers when her mother took her to the town market, but surely it’s impossible for someone to learn how to do math just from being taught the numbers, right?”

“Well,” says Benno, “the apprentices who come to me already know a little bit of math. It’s something their parents teach them, you know?”

The children who become apprentice merchants are generally the children of merchants themselves, so it’s not uncommon for the children to know how to read, write, and do basic math by the time they go through their baptismal ceremony. When I was a child, traveling with my trader parents, they taught me math and writing. Maine’s calculation abilities, however, are on an entirely different level.

“It’s not just a little bit of math. The south gate’s financial report calculates the quantity and costs of all of the equipment that we’ll need over the course of the year, right? These aren’t the tiny numbers you see at the town market, these are very significant sums once you start adding them all up, and she was able to just start doing those calculations like it was an everyday sort of thing. Also, she didn’t even need to use a calculator[1], she just worked everything out on her slate.”
“…That really isn’t something that you make an assistant do, usually? Letting a kid like her work on your financial report.”

I shoot a glare towards an amused Benno. For the sake of shocking them, I then tell them something that I’ve never told anyone before.

“Don’t tell anyone I ever said this, but I think I could trust her to do about seventy percent of the financial report on her own.”
“…What?!”
“…Seventy percent… Otto…”

They’re even more surprised than I thought they were going to be. Their faces have gone rigid and their eyes have gone wide with shock. I can’t help but start laughing.

“And it’s only seventy percent because there’s vocabulary words she doesn’t know yet! And it only gets worse. When I was away from the office, she was able to perfectly handle what needed to be done when someone came through with a letter of introduction from a nobleman.”

That had been shocking. I had been in a meeting that day, where my squad leader was constantly, restlessly, nervously fidgeting in his seat because he was missing the baptismal ceremony for his beloved daughter. When that let out, Maine came to me to give a report: a merchant carrying a letter of recommendation from a low-ranking member of the nobility was waiting for processing.

Essentially, when a visitor comes through with a letter of introduction from one nobleman to another, we want to accommodate them as quickly as possible, validating their information and letting them through into the town. Even if they're commoners, they should still be treated like low-ranking noblemen. That day, the meeting I was in had been called by a high-ranking nobleman. Of course, when having to decide what to prioritize, a high-ranking nobleman's request comes before that of a low-ranking nobleman's. However, if we were to mistreat a guest, then they'd get furious at how rude we were being, brandish their low-ranking noble's letter of introduction like a shield, barge into our meeting, infuriate the high-ranking nobleman present, and make an enormous mess out of everything.

Instead, Maine directed the merchant, who was not a nobleman, to the waiting room for low-ranking noblemen, tickling his sense of self-conceit, then explained the fact that the ranking officials were in the middle of a meeting called by a high-ranking nobleman. Then, immediately after the meeting finished, she came to deliver a report so that there would be no misunderstandings with the leading private and the merchant could be swiftly processed through. She did all of this by instructing a new recruit what to do, despite the fact that he was so flustered that he was practically useless. It was perfect.

"What an amazing girl, isn't she?" says Corinna.
"Amazing, hmm… more like strange. Weird. However, I think that Squad Leader Gunther hasn't paid much attention to her peculiarities. From his perspective, I think he just sees her as his adorable, frail little girl. If I hadn't told him that I wanted her to be my assistant, nobody would have noticed her excellence, would they? Even now, he says things like 'my little girl is so clever!' without, I think, actually realizing how abnormally clever she really is."
"It's a good thing he's so slow, isn't it!" laughs Otto. "If she weirded him out, it wouldn't be strange at all for him to throw her away!"
Corinna frowns, sadly. "Don't joke about things like that. I don't even want to imagine it."
"It's alright, Corinna," I say, with a comforting smile. "Even if the squad leader did get weirded out, and if she were to be thrown out, then maybe Benno could adopt her instead. After all, she's so brilliant that she was able to turn the tables on him completely."

Corinna softly smiles at that. Yep, as I thought, Corinna is way cuter when she smiles.

“Hey,” says Benno, lightly drumming his fingers on the table, “do you think that girl’s going to be able to make that paper?” As he looks at me, I notice that his eyes once again are filled with a merchant’s shrewd gleam.

“A kind of paper that isn’t parchment, was it? I think she can definitely do it.”
“You’ve got a lot of faith in her, huh?”
“Hmmm… earlier, she told me that there was something she wanted immediately, and she really wanted to make it, but she didn’t have the strength to do it herself… could it be that? I told her that she could always try to convince someone to do it for her if she couldn’t do it herself. If Lutz is going to be her hands and feet, moving as she directs, then she’ll be able to complete it.”

She told me that she regretted how little strength and stamina she had, which means that she must already know how she wanted to make it. Then, she declared that she was going to be able to make it, as if she knew her probability of success was high. Most likely, that wasn’t a bluff.

“…If she actually does this, it’ll turn the town’s market upside down. How am I going to handle this girl?”
“Are you thinking of taking her on yourself?”

From what Benno is saying, it sounds like he’s thinking about taking on not just Lutz as an apprentice, but Maine as well. It’s just a guess, but when I say it out loud, Benno’s eyes go wide.

“Of course! You think I could let a something like that fall into someone else’s hands?! Just what kinds of things is she capable of making by herself? That 'hairpin’ she wore, whatever product she uses in her hair, paper that isn’t parchment… and that’s just the things that I know about from today! She has to have even more ideas secreted away. She is a calamity that could singlehandedly throw the entire market into chaos.”
“Wait a minute! That’s *my* apprentice! You can’t just steal her like that!”

I don’t think that Benno’s claim is wrong, but I do have objections. I’ve spent the last half-year training her, raising her so that she can unleash her full potential on the year-end budget reports. There’s no way I’m just going to stand idly by as Benno snatches her away from me. Benno, however, lets out a snort of laughter, puckering his lips into a smug sort of smile.

“She said that becoming a merchant was her number-two aspiration. She has no interest in being your assistant! You’ve only been training her for, what, half a year? Find someone else, Otto.”
“Where am I going to find someone else who can be trained into usefulness in half a year?! Maine can think of things, Lutz can make those things, so then there’s no problem at all with her continuing to work at the gate, is there?!”

I’m especially not going to surrender her during budget season. Benno and I glare at each other with all our might, willing the other to capitulate. I grab my cup, and pound back the rest of my drink.

“Of course there is!” Benno roars. “I’m going to make her contract with the merchant’s guild. I can’t risk her getting snatched up by someone else.”
“Think about her health, then! Working with the merchant’s guild will be impossible!”
“Her health?”

Benno deflates, like he’s suddenly exhausted. I see an opening, and immediately hammer home my point.

“Her constitution is so weak that she’s almost shockingly feeble, right? Getting her to do any sort of work that involves her body would be impossible!”
“…She’s that frail, huh?”
“Yeah, when she went to a nearby village on pig-slaughtering day, she suddenly collapsed. The squad leader brought her back to the night duty room so she could rest. That was the first time I really came into contact with her. I thought that she was going to be fine, since she was in a warm room with a fireplace, so I gave her a slate so she could kill some time and left her alone. Not even one bell later, she got a fever and collapsed again.”
“Uh?”

I needed to stand watch that day, so I’d left her next to the fireplace in the night duty room for a while. When I came back in to check on her, she’d collapsed due to fever. When the squad leader came to pick her up, he told me to pay it no mind, because it happened all the time. Her extreme feebleness seems to be something her family just kind of accepts by now.

“When spring came around, it was awful for her. She couldn’t even walk on her own from her house to the gate.”
“Wait… to the gate?” asks Benno.

“No matter where your house is in this town, making it to the gate isn’t really very far, you know?” adds Corinna.

The city is surrounded on all sides by a wall, so the town itself isn’t actually all that big. Even going at a child’s pace, going from the west gate to the east gate shouldn’t take more than one bell’s worth of time.

“That’s right, the squad leader’s house isn’t particularly far from the south gate. However, that didn’t do Maine any good. She’d get exhausted about halfway there, and after the squad leader carried her the rest of the way in his arms, she was laid out in the duty room, unable to move, all the way until noon. After that, she’d usually have to stay in bed for another two or three days.”
“Hey, that… is she really alright? Won’t she just *die* if she has to do any work?”

I can’t at all say that I’m not afraid of that. In particular, Benno is always full of vigor, and his workplace is so busy that it’s always brimming with raw energy. I can’t imagine that being a place where Maine would be fit to work.

“Well, by the time spring was halfway through, she was finally able to make it all the way to the gate, and she needed to stay in bed far less than before. When spring was over, she was able to make it all the way out to the forest, but I think she still doesn’t have the strength to do any ordinary work. So, I was thinking that she should work at the gate, where doing paperwork is her sole responsibility and she can take care of herself…”
“Mm…”

I’d said she had a weak constitution, but it seems like Benno hadn’t thought that she was quite so frail. He furrows his brow as he contemplates. He might be figuring out how to change course now that he knows that all of his previous plans aren’t going to work out for him. If that’s the case, then I should probably give him one more piece of information.

“Lutz is the one who’s always been keeping an eye on Maine. Whenever she got separated from the rest of the children coming back from the forest, Lutz stayed behind to escort her all the way back. The squad leader gave him some pocket money for it, but I think he did it because of his strong sense of loyalty and responsibility.”

Lutz is at that age where most boys just want to run around wildly, but he’s instead always accompanying Maine. That’s not something that just anyone could do.

Incidentally, I don't have any strong sense of loyalty like that; there's nobody to whom I'm devoted besides Corinna.

"…I can't fathom all of that girl's abnormalities, but that boy is pretty strange too," says Benno.
"Hm?"

Benno rubs his chin lightly, looking like he's just remembered something. Gradually, an unpleasant expression creeps onto his face.

"It wasn't just the girl who was able to stand up to my stare and clearly state their own opinions. Moreover, most people would ordinarily see a sickly girl like that as trouble, but he seems to treat her like he's her guardian? He stood in front of her, like he was trying to protect her from me. Despite that, though, as soon as she started negotiating with me, he stepped back like it was only natural for him to do so."
"Yeah, now that you mention it…"

Just like Benno said, after he clearly made his declaration, he handed the reins over to Maine as she made the proposal. This doesn't seem to me like the usual sort of protector/protectee relationship. What kind of relationship could they possibly have?

"There aren't very many kids who think about when they should step forward or when they should let someone else do the talking. On top of that, even though I couldn't get any information out of the girl, she tells him everything so that he can make things for her. If I only had the girl, I wouldn't be able to get information out of her, so it would be meaningless. If I only had the boy, then the girl would find someone else to make her things for her, so that would be meaningless too. It's much better to keep those two as a set."

I can't help but smile when I see the sharpness of Benno's merchant's intuition. He didn't just notice Maine, he also sized up how useful Lutz was, and after meeting the two of them just once, he so clearly noticed all of those things about them. He's as quick-witted as they come.

"You've got a keen sense of smell as always… The squad leader seems to put a lot of trust in Lutz as well. He seems to be the person who has the greatest influence on her. He's there for her right when she collapses, and he can prevent her from running amok to chase things outside her reach by skillfully helping her out."

“Hmm, if he’s able to confidently state that he’ll make everything that Maine can come up with, then he must have something to back that up.”

Lutz had said something about how Maine was always like that. There’s probably even more things that Maine has done that I’m not even aware of.

“I think they’ve probably made some other weird things together, probably. Didn’t they mention something called 'clay tablets’?”
“…Weird things? Damn, I have no idea what kind of things they could be making! Regardless, those two are a single set. I’ll take them both. I’ll surrender neither of them to you.”

With a single stroke, the subject was settled. Corinna stands up from her chair, leaving to go start preparing dinner. She leaves behind a lamp for the table, a small cask in case we wanted to refill our drinks, and some snacks to go with our liquor. As I gnaw on the slightly salty jerky, I look over at Benno pouring himself another drink.

“Hey, Benno. Do you have any idea of what Maine was asking about, that wriggling sort of fever inside her body?”
“…”
“I’ve never heard of a fever that thrashes around inside your body like that, feeling like it’s going to consume you.”

From his reaction when Maine asked the question, I think he might have some inkling of what might be happening, and from his reaction now, I think he really does know something. His eyes are raised, just a little bit, as if he’s worried about whether or not he should say anything. After spending a while in contemplation, he mutters something in a voice that’s almost too quiet to hear.

“It might be… the devouring. I don’t have any proof, though.”
“…The devouring? What’s that?”
“It’s not an illness. It’s where you let too much mana build up in you with nothing to use it on. It eats you from the inside, then you die.”
“Wh… what?! Isn’t mana something that only the nobility have?”

My eyes fly open as soon as I hear that rare word. Mana is not a thing that commoners have. It’s a mysterious and powerful force. It’s not something that’s seen frequently, so I don’t know much about it at all, but it’s said you can change the course of nations

if you have enough of it. That's why those who possess mana are the nobility, governing the country at the top.

"…It's not common, but there are people outside of the nobility who have mana. However, the magical implements needed to release that mana are very expensive, so it's more accurate to say that only the nobility have the ability to properly *use* their mana."

Benno is quickly rising through a company with connections to the nobility, so his knowledge about the workings of this country is much deeper than mine.

"Huh! Maine has mana. I wonder if that's why she's so strange?"
"Didn't I just say that I have no proof? If it's the devouring, though, that would explain why she's so small for her age and why she collapses so frequently."
"Is mana so hazardous?"

I had thought that mana was a wondrous, useful, but mysterious thing, but if Maine's weakness is the result of magic, then I wonder if it's something dangerous as well.

"If this somehow really is the devouring… yeah. If it's the devouring, and she can't release that mana, that girl is… going to die very soon."
"Wh–?!"

An image of Maine's doting father flashes into my mind, and I'm hit with a feeling like a bucket of cold water was dumped over me. I stare at Benno in shock. From the serious expression on his face, this doesn't look like any sort of joke or friendly banter.

"It seems that mana builds up in someone as they grow up, and it starts to devour their heart. There are many commoners who don't have access to magical implements who just simply die before they're even baptized."
"Is there anything she can do?"

If anyone knows of a good solution to this problem, it would be Benno. As I plaintively ask for advice, he combs his fingers back through his hair, then lets out a sigh.

"If she had the backing of a noble, then they could lend her a magical implement and postpone her death. …However, she'd effectively be theirs until she died. She'd only be living for the sake of using her power for that noble. Between dying surrounded by

her family or living her entire life as a noble's pet, I don't know which I would rather choose."
"…"

There was no salvation in anything he just said. To be honest, I have no idea which of those two I'd pick, either. I don't want to die, but I also am deeply concerned that being a nobleman's pet for life would be equally awful.

"It's a somewhat different story if you can keep the built-up power pinned down with your willpower. A child, though, doesn't have the sheer force of will to be able to keep that up indefinitely. …I wonder how that girl will do?"
"…"

Just looking at Maine, I can tell that she has much more willpower than other kids her age. However, I don't know if even she'll be able to hold down her mana long enough to keep the devouring at bay. She seems to be keeping it in check for now, but if her mana keeps growing as she does, then I don't think anyone could have any idea about when she might finally reach her limit.

"Otto, don't look so serious. We still don't actually know if it's the devouring. Look at it this way: if it really was, she'd be very close to death. Do you think she'd be able to walk around outside if that were actually the case?"
"I… guess so…"

A tiny bit of relief and a heavy pile of anxiety simultaneously crash through my heart.

That's right, Maine has seemed close to death countless times. She may be able to walk around outside now, but that was the result of her enormous struggle during the spring. Before that, I hear that she really wasn't able to go out like that.

Is she really going to be okay? I don't know whether I should tell the squad leader about this or not.

Inexpressible emotions tumble around in my chest, and I down the rest of my drink.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. The word Otto uses is indeed the word for "calculator" (計算機), although he's referring to the wooden counting device he used a few chapters ago. In modern English, we say calculator to refer to an electronic calculator, but it still does actually mean "a device that calculates".

Chapter 27
The Road to Washi

I'm going to make *washi*.[1] My circumstances have finally come together to let me do that. On top of that, it's not something I'm going to make, but something that Lutz is going to make for me. As a step forward in his job search, of course. Right now, I'm soaring, like a figure skater leaping in the air to spin in a full circle… no, a circle and a half!

Don't you dare snark about the idea of me jumping! It's *hard* in this body!

"Eheheheh. Heheheh."
"Maine, I'm glad you're in a good mood, but… you're kinda getting a little too excited! Aren't you going to get sick again?"
"It's not like I can help it! We're going to make *paper*, you know? We can actually make paper, you know? And, if we make paper, then I can make books! Woohoo!!"

Now that books are finally almost in my grasp, how could I possibly *not* get excited? As I make my way home, practically jumping with every step, Lutz lets out a sigh, like he's at his wits' end.

"…Maine, sure, we're going to make it, but… how exactly are we going to do that? I definitely have no idea. Are we going to need tools? Can we really actually do this?"

Sighing, Lutz grumbles out his objections. In an instant, I come crashing back down to the real world.

…That's right. It we don't make all of the tools ourselves, we have nothing!

I'm pretty sure I know the process for making *washi*. I even remember the names of all the tools we need. However, when it comes to making those tools, I might have read a few books about the sorts of things those obsolete craftsmen used, but I can't actually remember the fine details. If I don't have the tools, I won't be able to make any paper.

…Whoa, our first step is to make the tools, huh… Immediately starting to make paper seems pretty impossible. Aaargh, once again, my modern knowledge just isn't quite good enough!

"…Hey, Maine. You just got really quiet. Don't tell me that, after all of that, you can't actually make it?"

Lutz has a look of extreme worry on his face, so I emphatically shake my head.

"Don't say that! I definitely know how to make paper. It's something I've been wanting for a very long time. But, I don't have the strength to cut up enough wood, I still don't know how to use fire, and I can't crush the fibers like I need to. I couldn't ask you to make it for me before, because that would have been too selfish…"
"I told you I was going to help you out, so I would have been fine with that…"

Lutz pouts, looking a little bit chagrined. I'm happy he's so willing to help, but making paper is going to be very physically intensive work. It's going to be on a level far above helping me dig up some clay or helping me cut some wood down to size.

"Um, Lutz, all I can do is teach you how to do it. It's not like the things we've been doing before, where I can do them myself but you helped me out, this is going to be something where you do everything by yourself, from the very start to the very end. Do you still want to do it, if it's like that?"
"Of course. I told you: you come up with things, I'll make them."

Lutz immediately nods his head, but I need more confirmation. I can't help but think that he might be getting carried away.

"That's the thing, Lutz. We have to start all the way back with making the tools first. Can you stick with that?"
"…You'll be helping too, right?"
"Of course, I'll do whatever I can!"

As I say that, I start thinking. Even when we're just getting started making the tools, I'm going to have to figure out what kind of tools we're going to need to make the tools. While I'm at it, I should try searching my house for anything we could use as a substitute. I might make my mother mad again, but we're going to have no choice but to find substitutes for anything that we don't have the wherewithal to make ourselves.

“I’m going to write down a list of all the tools we need, and try looking for things we can use for those. If I can’t find any, we’re going to have to make them, though… Lutz, I’d like you to search for wood that we can use to make paper.”
“We can find all the wood we need in the forest, right?”
“That’s true, but I don’t know what kind of wood is suitable for making paper.”

I know that plants like the paper mulberry, Oriental paperbush, or ganpi are suitable for making *washi*, but I don’t know what trees in this world would make good paper.

“Ummm, so, wood that would be easy to use in paper would have long, durable fibers. They’d need to be sticky, too, and easy to bond together, and we’d need to be able to extract a lot of them… and so on, but I don’t actually know how exactly to spot what kind of tree has long, durable fibers.”

On top of that, a paper mulberry’s wood is only suitable if it’s less than a year old. I remember reading that after two years the fibers start to stiffen and become very difficult to use for making paper.

However, I can’t tell if a tree is one or two years old just by looking at it.

“…You’re telling me to do something complicated like that, but I don’t know how to do it either.”
“I guess you’re right. For now, I know that there’s soft wood and hard wood, but wood is softer when it’s younger, right?”
“And then it gets harder as it gets older, yeah.”

Lutz, having more experience than me, knows much more about wood than I do after all. For me, every kind of wood is difficult to cut, but Lutz knows what kinds of wood are easy or hard for him to cut, so it seems he can tell the difference between the softer and harder woods.

“Well, there’s paper we could make that uses either bamboo or bamboo grass, and there’s pros and cons to doing that, but for now, since I think we can make paper out of other kinds of vegetation, we should probably focus on a paper that’s the easiest to make for now, right? Plus, if we’re going to commoditize this, that’s all the more reason that we need to pick a wood that’s easy to use.”
“Huh…”

Lutz nods slightly, mumbling to himself about woods that might be easy to use.

“If we can find one, it would be even better if we could find trees that we could cultivate, so we could make acquiring the raw materials even easier, but we don’t know what kinds of trees are easy to cultivate, right?”
“No, trees that are and aren’t easy to grow are pretty different. There’s definitely trees that can be easily grown.”
“Really?!”

I gnash my teeth at how low Maine’s XP total is after having never gone outside. I’ve only been able to go out to the forest since a month ago. I can’t even cut any wood right now, let alone pick what kinds of wood we should be using.

“Alright, I’ll leave finding the wood to you, Lutz. I want to test a lot of different types and compare their pros and cons, so try coming up with a few kinds of soft-ish wood. After that… I want to find some *‘sunset hibiscus’*.”
“What the heck is that?”
“The thing I’m thinking of is the root of that tree, but I don’t know if there’s anything like that around here. What I want is a tree that has a goopy, sticky sap… a fruit would do too, I guess. Do you know of any?”

Lutz ponders for a moment, but nothing seems to come to mind immediately.

“No…, I don’t think so.”
“We’re going to be using it as a glue to stick the plant fibers together, so there has to be something.”
“I’ll try asking someone who knows a lot about the forest.”
“Alright, then! I’ll go and work on remembering the process and writing down all the tools we’ll need to make it happen. After that, I’ll start figuring out how we’re going to make everything.”

By the time we’ve finished laying out what we’re each going to be doing next, we’ve arrived back at my house.

“We’re here,” says Lutz. “Alright, let’s do our best!”
“Yeah!”

Just making paper seems daunting, but the work of developing a prototype that could actually be turned into a salable good looks like it will require a lot of patient work. As soon as I returned home, I went straight for my slate. What I need to do now is try my best to remember the entire process involved in making *washi* and write out a list of all the tools I think we'll need.

The first step of the process is to harvest the trees or plants that we'll use as raw materials. Lutz has a knife that's kind of like a machete, so we don't need anything else in particular here. Right, next step.

When using paper mulberry, you need to steam the dark-colored bark off of the wood first, I think. If that's the case, we'll need a steamer. Since I haven't seen our family use a steamer, if we happen to have one in the kitchen, I'll be able to borrow it. I quickly search through the kitchen, but don't find anything. Well, I haven't tried to drag out any steamed recipes yet, so it's no surprise that we don't have a steamer. I add "steamer" and "pot" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

When the wood is steamed, we immerse it in cold water, then immediately skin off the outer bark while the wood is still hot. In other words, it'll be best if we don't have to go far from where we do the steaming to the river, but since we already have knives, we don't really need any other tools. Right, next step.

Neither letting everything fully dry out nor stripping off the white bark after exposing it to the river for a day requires any particular tools. Since we have a knife, we can make do. Right, next step.

Then, we boil the white bark with ash, making it soft, then remove the excess. In other words, we need a pot and some ash. We can use the same pot that we needed in order to do the steaming, but getting the ashes is going to be difficult. I'm pretty sure my mother isn't going to give me any, and I don't know if boiling the wood will produce ash in a sufficient quantity. I add "ash" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Then, we expose it to the river for over a day again in order to remove all of the ash, then leave it out in the sun to whiten it. Then, we remove all of the chips and knots. This is, generally, all physical labor. We don't particularly need any tools here. Right, next step.

Then, we beat the fibers until they have a consistency like cotton. Here, we'll need some sort of rectangular timber that we can use for that. We should be able to make this out of either fresh wood or firewood. I add "rectangular timber" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Next, we thoroughly mix the beaten fibers with water and the sunset hibiscus sap, then spread the resulting pulp on a special frame and let the water drain out. Mixing everything together will need a bucket, tub, or some other kind of bowl. After that comes the wooden frame with a removable bamboo mat, called a *suketa*, we'll need in order to spread everything out. I think our *suketa* is going to be our number-one problem. I add "tub" and "paper frame" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Then, we remove the mat from the frame, then transfer the drained paper to a drying bed. We let these stacks of paper dry on their own for a full day. I add "drying bed" to the list on my slate. Right, next.

After that, we slowly apply pressure to the paper using either weights or a clamp to wring the last of the water out. After pressure is applied, we leave everything as-is for another full day, by which point the stickiness from the sunset hibiscus sap will have completely disappeared. I wonder what we could use for weights? Certainly, there's the big stone weight we use for pressing oil, but is Lutz able to use that? For now, I just add "weights".

When we're finished pressing the paper, we carefully peel it from the stacks on the drying bed one at a time, then stick it to another board. I add "flat board" to my list.

Then we let it dry in the sunlight, remove it from the board when it's dry, and then we're finished.

"Hmmm, now that I'm thinking everything out, we're going to need a lot of things, huh…"

The things we need: steamer, pot, rectangular timber, ash, tub, paper frame, drying bed, weights, and a flat board. Also, the raw wood and the sunset hibiscus sap.

I've seen photos and illustrations of the process, so I can generally remember how everything fits together, but since I've never actually done it for myself, I don't know any of the finer details. In our pulp, for example, what ratio of fibers to water to sap are we going to need? However, I recall watching a TV show where a particularly un-

pop-idol-like pop idol went to a rural village and made some paper, and if a pop star can do it, then there's no way that I can't do it too.

I need to remember more details about that program. Memory, do your best! …Well, hmm, that pop idol… was borrowing someone else's tools, right? She didn't have to make her own? And she had someone guiding her through the process, didn't she? Rrrrrrgh.

It's not just like I only have theoretical knowledge. I have indeed personally made paper before: in home economics class once, we made a sheet of recycled paper the size of a postcard out of a milk carton. I think it's better than nothing at all, but it's certainly not something I can actually rely on.

For now, let's try taking on the production of a postcard-sized sheet. It'll be easier to build the tools at a small scale as well, and when we're experimenting with different kinds of wood, small batches are better to make than large.

“So, Lutz,” I say, “how about we start making the steamer first?”

In Chinese cooking, they use a round wooden basket to steam food. Making something like that would be very difficult, but making a four-sided wooden box shouldn’t be quite so hard. I sketch out the design on my slate and show it to Lutz.

“Making it should be really simple, but do you have any nails?”
“Uh?! Can’t you… put notches in the wood and join them together with those?”
“What are you talking about?”

Making the tools has hit a snag. We don’t have the tools we need to make the tools.

We may be able to cut wood to size, but we don’t have nails. Plus, nails here are not priced such that a child could buy them if they decided they wanted to use some. Plus, although we have the tools to cut wood, we don’t have any of the smaller implements we’d need for any fine work.

It would be great if I could just borrow my dad’s tools, carve out some joints, and put everything together like an old-school carpenter, but there’s no way I have enough knowledge of that kind of skilled labor to actually make use of it. Incidentally, although Lutz can do many things for me if I just give him an explanation, I can’t call any of it skilled labor.

Nails are something people use in their day-to-day life, so there’s no way we wouldn’t be able to go to a hardware store and just buy them. The problem is our purchasing power. All of our options are suddenly closed.

“What are we going to do, Maine?”
“Um, I’ll consult with Otto. He’s familiar with things like market prices and tradesmen, so I might be able to get nails if I help out…”

Since I can’t even do any labor for my family, I have no choice but to go to the one place where someone will actually pay me for my efforts.

The next day, I go to the gates and ask Otto about it.

“Mister Otto, I have a question… Um, do you know how much nails tend to cost? Also, if you know a tradesman that sells them cheaply, I’d really appreciate it if you could introduce me to them…”
“…Why nails? I don’t think you’re going to be able to make use of them, Maine.”

That’s right. I don’t have enough strength to actually use a hammer.

For someone who used to ask for slate pencils and ink to suddenly start asking for nails must be incomprehensible to him. As he tilts his head to the side in wonder, I sigh, then start to explain.

“I want to start making the tools I’ll need to make paper, but I don’t actually have the tools I’ll need to make those tools.”
“Ahahahahaha…!” Otto bursts into laughter, slapping the table as he laughs wildly.
“It’s not funny!” I say, pouting at him. Of course, just the other day, I harshly declared to Benno that I was absolutely going to make it by spring, so for me to immediately turn around and say that I can’t even start on the tools might actually be really hilarious. For me, however, it’s a really serious matter.

Otto wipes a tear from his eye as he calms down, a wide grin spreading across his face. I can clearly see that this is the slightly menacing smile of a calculating merchant. As he chuckles pleasantly at me, I’m suddenly very much on my guard.

“If you teach me how to make whatever it is you put in your hair, how about I finance your nail purchases?”

The value of what he’s asking for does not at all match what he’s offering. This is an absurdly huge ripoff. If Otto were to then let that information slip to Benno, then I would lose one of my most important cards that I could use against him. The price of that is far too high.

“…Just for some nails, I can’t tell you how to make it. When I think about Benno’s reaction the other day, I think it might be something very profitable.”
“…You’ve got good eyes,” he mutters, with the tiniest gleam of admiration in his eyes.

As I stall with a vague sort of answer, I frantically start to think. I've got no other rope to cling to besides Otto's, so if I lose him, I've got nothing. I have to come to some sort of compromise here.

…Why would Mister Otto be so interested in my simple all-in-one shampoo?

Otto, unlike Benno, is not a merchant. Therefore, I don't think he wants to bring it to market as a new commodity. It might make sense if he wanted to get Benno indebted to him.

…Otto is a comparatively neat person, but he doesn't seem to be the type to care enough about his appearance that he'd go to the trouble of making something just for it. If I really had to say it, the people who'd want to do that would be women… his wife?! Is it his wife?!

"…Mister Otto, it's too much for me to tell you how to make it, but if you wanted to exchange goods, I'd be okay with that."
"Yeah?" he says, raising his eyebrows a little bit.

Based on his look of interest, it seems like learning my methods might not actually be the important thing here. I fix my gaze on my tiny chance of victory and take another step forward.

"…Ummm, that's right. I can teach Miss Corinna how to use it, and show her how to make her hair smooth and glossy. I could just give you the product, but it would be useless without the instructions, so that's what I can offer you."
"Sounds good to me. It's settled, then!"

Otto nods in agreement, looking like he didn't even give it a second thought. I had thought that bringing up Corinna would be my most effective move, but I didn't think that such a simple thing would take me quite that far.

"Well then," he says, "come over to my house on my next day off. Let's make the exchange then, alright?"
"Alright!"

Just like that, it was decided that I'd bring my simple all-in-one shampoo to Otto's house on his next day off, then play beautician (a shampoo-only beautician) for the day.

I breathe a little sigh of relief at having somehow managed to secure some nails, but my own stock of shampoo is already almost entirely gone. On top of that, because this shampoo is a consumable good if you can't make more of it, from now on it's very likely that Otto will insist on making more trades in the future.

"Lutz, I got us some nails."
"Seriously? Wow, Maine, you're really amazing, aren't you?"
"Yeah, I'm going to get some in exchange for giving Otto some *'simple all-in-one shampoo'*, but… I don't have much of it left. Would you mind helping me make some for me today?"
"Sure, sounds good."

Better yet, if I make a little more of it to put aside, why couldn't I use it as a source of additional fundraising?

"If we had a little more time, we could gather melil to use for this, but in this season, rio is the best fruit for it."

Lutz and I gather rio fruit from the forest, then go back to my place to squeeze the oil out of it. Lutz still can't use the big stone weight to press it down, so we smash it out with a hammer. I take the freshly-squeezed oils and throw various herbs in one by one.

"Hmmm!" says Lutz. "That's really simple to make, isn't it?"
"That's right. The important part of this is the kind of oil you use and the kinds of herbs you mix it with. So, Lutz, even if we're going to be selling the finished product in exchange for the things that we want, we can never show anyone how it's made."
"Why?"
"Since it's so simple, once you show someone how to do it, they can make it themselves, right? You won't be able to trade with them ever again, you know?"
"Ah, okay! I get it."

I take a portion of the completed shampoo, put it in a somewhat small container, and hold it out for Lutz. He looks down at it dubiously, head tilted to one side.

“I don’t need any, though? Maine, you’re the one getting money and buying things, so you should hold onto that.”
“This is your share after making it, Lutz. How about you use it to make Mrs. Carla happy? Hasn’t she been pestering you about what you did to your hair?”

After I made Lutz’s hair look good to prepare for his interview with Otto, his mother started persistently assaulting me with questions. I haven’t met her since then, so I’m sure that she’s turned her questioning on Lutz.

“Oh, thanks a bunch! You’re a lifesaver, Maine.”

With a happy look, he takes the container from me. I grin broadly at him, imitating Otto’s smile.

“Mrs. Carla is a very forceful woman, so you have to make sure that you don’t let her get the secret of how to make it out of you. This is good practice for giving someone something without telling them how it was made. When we become merchants, we’re going to have a whole lot of things that we’re going to need to keep secret, after all.”
“…I really want to practice on something easier, though…” he says, smiling dejectedly.

I still don’t have those nails in hand. The road to *washi* will be a long one.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. Washi is a kind of paper that was made in Japan, using primarily manual methods.

Chapter 28
The Invitation To Otto's Residence

The invitation to Otto's residence is a formal invitation from Corinna, delivered to me through Otto. It's a thin board on which words have been written.

"This really isn't something I should respond to by myself," I tell him. "If I don't ask my mother first…"

It is probably very strange for a child such as myself who hasn't yet been through their baptismal ceremony to receive a written invitation like this. Wouldn't this ordinarily be something addressed to one's parents? That would mean that my parents would be the people who'd decide if I would actually attend.

Otto raises his eyebrows slightly at my remarks, then shakes his head. "Out of your entire family, aren't you the only one who can really read? On top of that, this isn't something you can refuse. If you did, there's a chance that your mother and your sister would suddenly see their work dry up, after all."
"What?! Wh… what are you saying?!"

Corinna's parents run a successful company, and she herself is quite skilled, so she must be a fairly influential member of the tailor's guild. Based on the various explanations I've been given, if Tory's seamstress apprenticeship is like being a part-timer, and my mother's work at the dyery is like being a line manager, then Corinna can be thought of as being an executive.

Hierarchical societies are *scary*. I can't turn this one down. Got it.

This, though, isn't an invitation from Corinna, but one from Otto, so my father might be able to reject it using his own authority. This is very complicated.

"Besides," says Otto, "I thought that now would be a great chance to study written invitations, too."
"Oh, I see! Thank you very much."

With Otto's help, I look over the invitation, learning about both invitations themselves and how to reply to them.

"Did you just say a written invitation from Madam Corinna?! What? Seriously?! Why?!"
"She heard about my *'simple shampoo'* from Otto, and wants to try it for herself."
"Well, I'll be!"

When my mother saw me return home bearing an official written invitation, she flew into a huge panic. I try asking her if I should decline after all, but in her excessive panic her eyes go wide with rage.

"Turning it down would be unthinkable! We have to be polite!"
"Okay! I'll be careful."

Somehow, this seems less like an invitation, and more like an official summons.

After that, my mother frantically starts making me a brand-new apron. It seems that going to Corinna's dressed in my usual clothes would not be proper. As she works, she warns me about every breach of etiquette she can think of, so that I won't accidentally be impolite. All I had planned to do was teach Corinna how to use my shampoo, but it's somehow turned into this huge uproar.

"You're so lucky, Maine… You're going by yourself, even though I'm the one who made it…"
"Mommy, can Tory go with me too?"
"Absolutely not! She doesn't have an invitation."

Although I'm the one who thought up the simple shampoo, Tory's been the one doing the manufacturing up until now. I think she's more than qualified to come along with me, but since bringing an uninvited guest along with you is rude even here, Tory is going to be stuck at home no matter how jealous she may be.

Otto and I have arranged to meet in the central plaza at the ringing of the third bell, just like last time. On top of my usual clothes, I put on the brand new apron my mother made for me, and head off with my father towards the plaza. I bring my tote bag with me, into which I made very sure to put a little jar full simple shampoo and a comb.

When we arrive, Otto is already waiting near the fountain. My father promptly turns me over to him.

“Squad Leader,” says Otto, “Don’t worry, I’ll take proper care of her. Now, Maine, shall we?”
“Yep. See you later, Daddy!”
“Yeah.”

After waving farewell to my father, Otto starts walking towards the castle walls. It seems that his house is near the castle. The closer you get to the castle where the nobility live, the higher the rent becomes, so it looks like Otto’s house is in what you might call an exclusive residential district.

“Mister Otto, you live near the castle walls, even though you’re a soldier?”
“I live in an apartment above Corinna’s parents’ home. Her older brother couldn’t bear to let go of his adorable little sister, so he told her to live there.”
“Huh, I see…”

Now that he mentions it, I think I remember hearing that it’s almost like he married into her family. Certainly, without the financial support of his wife’s family, he wouldn’t be able to afford living in such a place on a low-ranking soldier’s wages. He told me that he’d used up all his life’s savings to purchase his citizenship, so perhaps was everyone connected to his wife extremely concerned about how penniless they were immediately after getting married?

Gradually, the kinds of people I see walking around start to change from what I’m used to. Their clothing is less and less patched together, and incorporates more and more fluttering, decorative fabrics in their design. The shops on the first floors of the buildings we walk past are different, as well. The shops themselves are bigger, with more employees and more customers going in and out. Along the roads, the number of coaches and wagons has been increasing, while I’ve been seeing fewer and fewer donkey-drawn carts.

It’s an almost physical shock to see that such a clear class divide exists in a single city, and just within walking distance for me, too. I’d read about things like this, so I kind of had an idea of what it was like already, but there’s a night and day difference between imagining it and seeing it right in front of me. Eyes gleaming, I take in as much of the surroundings as I can.

“It’s on the third floor here,” says Otto.
“The third?!”

Otto’s residence is on the third floor of a seven-story building. When the first floor of a building is a store, the second floor is generally the residence of the store’s owner. The third through sixth floor are rented out, and it’s very common to see the seventh story used for housing for the live-in apprentices and other employees of the store. The closer a floor is to the road, and the closer it is to a well, the more expensive it is. If I had to say it, my home is on the fifth story of a building out by the gates. (Please understand my financial situation.) For Corinna to have a place reserved for her right above her parents’ residence, she really must be this store’s beloved princess.

…I wonder how he was even allowed to marry her. This is surprising! A trader and a rich young woman surely have very different social stature, I think, so how did something like this happen in this world?

“I’m home, Corinna! I’ve brought Maine with me.”
“Welcome, Maine. I’ve been waiting to meet you. My name is Corinna. I’m Otto’s wife.”
“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Corinna. My name is Maine. I’m grateful to everything your husband has done for me.”

This is my first time seeing Corinna, and I’m startled by how pretty and lovely of a woman she is. Her hair is a pale cream, as if the light of the moon had gathered in it. She has is gently gathered behind her, accentuating her slender neck. Her eyes are a silvery gray as well. Her whole color scheme is very light, making her seem almost ephemeral.

In contrast, her boobs are huge. Everything she’s got that sticks out sticks *way* out, and her waist is very narrow.

Otto, you’re so *shallow*!

As I’m lead into the parlor, I let out an appreciative breath as I see the patchwork tapestries, Corinna’s handiwork, that decorate the walls. This is my first time since coming to this world that I’ve seen a house with anything ornamental in it. This is probably the room she uses to meet with potential clients, so it’s filled with both a large quantity of clothes as well as these decorations made from the fabric remnants. The colors throughout the room are put together with a good eye, giving the room a relaxing atmosphere.

However, even in the house of a wealthy merchant, there are still more subtle concessions to frugality than I would have otherwise thought. The round table and chairs in the center of the room are neither finely engraved nor gleamingly polished, but are a simple, unornamented wooden design, with the wood left as is.

If I remember correctly, the furniture of Northern Europe tended to be simple. Also, because people are often shut inside for long periods of time during the winter, perhaps the furniture is designed such that it's possible to use it for long periods of time without getting tired of it.

"Thank you for coming all this way," says Corinna. "I've been very much looking forward to this ever since I heard you were coming to work on my hair."

As Corinna pours us some herb tea, the gentle voice she directs at me oozes the feeling of a well-raised daughter of a rich family. Her calm demeanor is one that could stir up a desire to protect her from harm.

"I'm very flattered. I've heard so many things about you from Mister Otto as well, so I've also been looking forward to meeting you. He'd told me how beautiful and adorable you are, but the way you've decorated this room and the quality of the clothes you have laid out is beyond what I had heard."
"…You really are a very well-disciplined young lady. And, your hair is just as pretty as I had heard. I wonder, will my hair become like this as well?"

Enraptured, Corinna gently strokes my hair. Last night, in order to make sure the value of this shampoo as a commodity was plainly visible, both my mother and Tory worked hard to make my hair practically shine. Today, my hair is even more glossy than it usually is.

"Shall we begin immediately?" I ask.

As I pull the small jar from my tote bag, Corinna's face lights up with excitement. She's absolutely adorable when she's expressing herself so openly. I can definitely see why Otto dotes on her so much.

"I would like to wash your hair, so I'll need to make the necessary preparations for bathing. If it isn't too much to ask, may I bother you for a bucket full of water and a cloth for washing?"

“Bathing, you say?”

Otto, not Corinna, shouts out in astonishment, his eyes going wide.

“…I’m only going to be washing her hair, Mister Otto. Umm, Miss Corinna, while Mister Otto is getting things ready, would you please change into clothing that is okay to get wet?”
“Yes,” she replies.
“…Oh, she’s going to be wearing clothes, huh.”

Corinna isn’t just a child like Lutz, so it’s only obvious that I’m not going to tell a woman such as herself to strip down. …Wait a minute, why are you talking like you’re hugely disappointed?

Otto stands up to get everything ready for bathing, saying that physical labor is the man’s job. He spreads out a cloth in the bedroom and brings in some water, then sets a small washcloth next to my jar of shampoo.

“…This is it, huh. What do you do with this?”

Otto, with keenly interested eyes, picks up the jar, shakes it a bit, peeks inside, and takes a sniff. I’m suddenly keenly aware that if he were to stick around while I’m working on Corinna’s hair, he’ll try to help out with everything, keep opening his mouth, and otherwise constantly butt in on the two of us, making the whole process extremely bothersome.

“This isn’t for men to see,” I say. “If you’re done with setting up, Mister Otto, please wait in another room.”
“What? I’m her husband!”
“If you’re the husband, then it’s even better for you to wait outside. When we’re finished, you can look at how beautiful your wife has become and shower her with compliments. Please don’t do something as un-gentlemanly as watching a woman pretty herself up.”
“That’s right,” says Corinna. “Otto, please do wait in another room.”

The two of us join forces and drive Otto, who still clearly wants to stay, out of the bedroom. I can hear his footsteps through the door as he wanders aimlessly around outside, but I ignore him, pouring some of the contents of the little jar into the washing bucket.

“This is called a *'simple all-in-one shampoo'*. To use it, you first fill up a bucket with about this much water, then pour about this much *'shampoo'* into it.”
“Ahh…”
“Next, we’ll drench your hair in the bucket, and wash it. Could I ask you to untie your hair, please?”

Corinna loosens her hair, and I timidly lower it into the bucket. Somehow, it’s not as dirty as I thought it would be; perhaps it hasn’t been that long since she last bathed. In order to make sure her scalp is thoroughly cleaned, I pour water over her head over and over as I wash.

“Please make sure you make extra effort to clean this part,” I explain as I work.
“…Letting someone else wash my hair feels really nice. I never knew that before.”
“I think that Otto would be happy to do it for you if you asked, you know?”

Or, rather, I’m pretty sure he’d try to jump in even if she didn’t ask.

“Oh? But didn’t you say that it was ungentlemanly for him to watch?”
“…I just thought that it would be a problem for him to be bothering the two of us, that’s all.”
“My! Heh heh, I wonder what in the world Otto has been saying around you for such a young girl as yourself to say things like that?”

It’s harder for me to wash Corinna’s hair than it is for me to wash Tory’s, since Corinna is so much bigger. I know without a doubt, however, that Otto is going to base the number of nails he gives me on how satisfied she is with my handiwork. I work diligently, to the very best of my ability.

“…Maine, do you mind if I ask you something?”
“What is it?”

I hear a hint of sharpness in her voice, and I’m suddenly put on edge.

“What’s Otto like, at the gate?”
“…Huh?”

I was totally preparing myself to deflect a question about how to make my simple shampoo. Her question caught me completely off-guard, and what she was asking didn't immediately register in my mind. I tilt my head to the side in confusion.

Corinna frowns. "He gave up on his career as a trader all because of me," she murmurs. "Sometimes I worry…"
"There's no need to worry," I say. "Even working at the gates he's still very much a trader."

He handles all of the accounting work by himself, even though it's so busy. He haggles with traders over the prices of goods and furnishings. He uses his position at the gate to its fullest to gather useful information. Truly, his guiding principles are that of a trader.

"Really? …He's a trader, at the gate?"
"Yes, he is. For example, when merchants come to deliver things to the gates, the wicked smile on his face while he drives down the price of the order is very trader-like."
"Heh heh, so you can see the trader in him. Yes… yes, of course. It's a big weight off my chest to hear that."

I use the washcloth to dry off Corinna's cream-colored hair. As I start to comb it out, it starts gleaming like a pearl.

Just like when I was washing Lutz's golden-blonde hair, I'm envious of how pretty Corinna's hair looks. It would be great if my hair looked like that, wouldn't it…

"If you can, please use a wooden comb when you comb out your hair. As you continue to use it, the wood of the comb will absorb moisture from your hair, and will make it shine even brighter."
"Alright. …It's really become quite beautiful, hasn't it," she murmurs appreciatively as she runs her fingers through her hair.
"The color of your hair was already very nice, so all you need to do is maintain it to bring out its natural beauty. I recommend that you wash it like this every five to seven days."

I gesture at the pot, which contains the rest of the shampoo, as I give my recommendation. Corinna frowns slightly, tilting her head to the side.

“Are you really alright with giving me this? I feel rather bad, not giving you anything in return…”
“That’s alright. Mister Otto is already paying me for it, in nails.”
“…Nails? Huh? Isn’t he getting the better end of the bargain? Are you alright with that?”

Even though he might be profiting more right now, I haven’t given up the recipe for how to make my shampoo, I’m getting my hands on the nails that I wanted to get, and since I know that Corinna is going to want more shampoo in the future, I’ll be able to get more things I want in the future, too. There’s really no problem here.

“Um, Maine. My clothes have gotten a bit wet, so I’d like to change. Would you mind waiting with Otto in the other room?”
“Yes, ma'am.”

I leave the bedroom so that Corinna can change her clothes in peace. As I open the door to leave, though, I see Otto, loitering by the bedroom door like a hungry bear waiting for his food to appear.

“Corinna?!” he exclaims.
“My clothes got a bit wet,” she says, poking her head around the door just a little bit, “so I’m going to change into something else. Otto, take care of Maine for me, would you?”

Her hair still hasn’t completely dried, so it slips along her damp clothes as she peeks around the corner. Her shy demeanor radiates a certain kind of appeal.

“I’m sorry to let you see me like this,” she says. “I’ll get changed right away.”

Corinna hurriedly ushers me out of the room, then quickly closes the door. Otto had caught only a glimpse of her just now, but he’s staring at the door with a completely blank expression. When I see Otto’s longing reaction after only seeing a little bit of her, I strike a triumphant victory pose in my heart. Without a doubt, he’s falling in love with her all over again.

“Eh heh heh, hasn’t Corinna become even more beautiful than before? Her creamy hair is shining like a jewel…”
“Ngh! Corinna!”
“She’s still changing!!”

Otto unthinkingly starts charging towards the bedroom door, and I hurriedly try to block him. Of course, with my strength, I can't do anything to stop him. The only one who can stop his rampage now is Corinna.

"Otto," she says from the other side of the door, "do you really want Maine to see me while I'm in the middle of changing?"

As soon as he hears her gentle voice, he suddenly stops moving, like his batteries got yanked out. After a brief moment of silence, he turns to me. He gives me a beautiful, *terrible* smile as he firmly squeezes my shoulder.

"…Maine, didn't you have something important you needed to go do?"

I get it. *I want to make out with my wife, so get the hell out of here,* he's saying.

I glance over at the bag sitting on the kitchen table. "I might remember something, depending on the number of nails I get," I say, smiling sweetly.

He looks at the bag of nails, then back at me. In his eyes, I can see a battle raging between his cool, calculating trader's senses and his burning love for his wife.

"…"
"If you give me *all* of them, I might even give my father a good excuse for why I'm going home alone."

Otto, who'd promised he would properly look after me, presses the entire bag into my arms, and I quietly head out the door.

…Go get 'em, tiger! Well, I acquired even more nails than I was hoping for, so, whatever. Please, do whatever it is you're going to do!

Gripping the bag full of nails tightly in both arms, I struggle my way down the street, all alone. Nails are *heavy*. A single one is pretty light, but when you pile them up like this, they're heavy as hell. Even after just walking a little bit, my arms are already trembling.

It's no use. I need a break.

At this rate, I'm not going to be able to stumble all the way home. I manage to make it to the fountain in the central plaza, then sit down to take a break.

My arms *hurt*.

As I shake out my trembling hands, then rub them together, Lutz comes into view, on his way home from somewhere. He walks past me, briskly.

"Oh? Lutz, what're you doing here?"
"Maine?! What are *you* doing here? Uh… all by yourself?!"

Fundamentally, my usual area of action is confined to my home, the gates, and the forest. Since I only ever take the shortest possible distance anywhere, I'm never out here in the central plaza. On top of that, since I have a habit of unexpectedly collapsing at any time, anywhere, it's unheard of for me to be anywhere by myself. Lutz's eyes go wide.

"Hm? I'm on my way back from Mister Otto's place. I was able to get all these nails from him. They're really heavy, and it's really far, so I'm taking a break."
"Argh," he grumbles, "I'll carry those for you. Man, why didn't he make sure bring you back safely?"

As he mumbles under his breath, he picks up the bag full of nails. I may have found that bag so heavy that it physically hurt me to carry it, but Lutz lifts is up like it isn't even that big of a deal.

"Thanks a lot, Lutz."

As the two of us walk back home, we tell each other about everything that happened today. While I was exchanging my shampoo for these nails, it looks like Lutz was asking around, checking with people who know a lot about the forest or know a lot about handling lumber to see if there might be any kinds of wood that would be easy to make paper with, or any plants that might be a reasonable substitute for sunset hibiscus.

When making *washi*, you traditionally use sunset hibiscus as a binding agent, but here, if you're looking for a sticky liquid, it seems that your best bet is either edil fruit or the bodily fluids of a slarmo bug.

Ur… urgh. I'd much, much prefer to use edil fruits than squeezing out an insect's fluids. Bugs, though, might be more resilient to the changing of the seasons…

I shake my head to clear out the unwanted thoughts of juicing bugs, then change the topic of conversation.

"Now that we've got nails, we can start working on the steamer."
"Hm? How big are we going to be making it? Didn't you say you wanted it to match the pot we'll be using? Did you get your mom to say we can use yours?"

Our steaming basket doesn't need to be very large at the moment, since we're just starting out, but if we can I'd really like to match it up with the pot we'd be using. However, both of our families use their pots only for cooking. Even if we ask to borrow one, it's unlikely they'll lend it to us.

"…No, I didn't. Actually, one time she got really mad at me and told me not to use the pot for anything that wasn't food."

If my mother won't even let me cook dried fish, I don't think she'd lend me a pot so that I can steam or boil any wood to make paper.

"That's no good," he says.
"It really isn't. …So what do we do?"
"Well, it's not like I can make one myself…"

Pots are expensive. Extremely expensive. They're always in use, even when they're in need of repair. This isn't the kind of thing that we can easily get our hands on just because we want one. Manufacturing one out of metal would also be very difficult.

"That's right, isn't it… maybe we should make the paper frame first. We already know how big it'll be, so we can start on that now."
"…I guess we have to build what we know we can build, yeah."

We got even more nails than I'd hoped for, and we've tentatively identified some materials we can use as a substitute for sunset hibiscus sap… so that's a step forward, at least… right?

Chapter 29
Benno's Summons

While doing our gathering in the forest, Lutz and I start work on building the paper frame. The basic part of it is just a wooden frame, which we can build relatively easily out of wood and nails. The hardest part will be cutting lumber to size and making sure it's straight; apart from that, the rest of the construction isn't particularly difficult. In particular, since we're not making a particularly large sheet of *washi*, just something about the size of a postcard, we don't need to have any extra beams to support the paper mat.

I'll try constructing this following the pattern of the little frame I used when I made paper in home economics class.

"Umm, if you could make it kinda like this…"

On my slate, I show Lutz a sketch of the general shape of the frame, then write out the list of necessary components. As he looks it over, we head off to start cutting timber.

"We have to make sure they're perfectly straight, or it's not going to work. It's okay if we have to shave things down to make them fit together at the end, though."
"That's harder than I thought. Straight, huh…"

He cuts the wood into pieces for two rectangular frames, so that the inner dimensions are about the same size as a postcard. Once we finish building the structure for the upper and the lower frames, we attach boards to prevent the upper frame from sliding around as we spread out the pulp and a handle so that we can easily hold the upper frame by hand.

"That's it! Lutz, this is looking great!"
"Is this what you wanted?"
"Yeah! We're going to put the paper mat between these frames like this, then grab the handle and rock it back and forth to spread out the fibers evenly. This is about the right shape for that."
"Shape?"

Seeing Lutz's dubious expression, I set the two frames on top of each other, then rattle them a bit to point out the uneven gaps between the two of them.

"We need to make sure that there's as few gaps between the two frames as we can get. Once we shave and polish these down so that they're precisely flat, it'll be perfect."
"Precisely?! I can't ask my dad or brothers for help, and I don't have the tools for that, you know…"
"…Can you borrow the tools?"
"I dunno…"

Although Lutz may have given up on becoming a trader, he is still refusing his parents' wishes for him to find a job relating to the woodworking or construction industries and has instead decided all by himself that he's going to become a merchant's apprentice. He must be getting an incredible amount of pressure from his parents. He's not really in a circumstance where he can just walk in and ask to borrow some tools or get some help building something.

Lutz's father thinks that merchants are cold-blooded people who think about nothing but money, and is absolutely opposed to his son becoming someone like that. His mother, Carla, is very glad that he's given up on being a trader and is instead looking for a job in the city, but she still wishes Lutz would give up on being a merchant, too.

No matter what kind of opposition he might face, Lutz isn't going to give up his dreams and will just keep forging ahead, despite his family's disapproval. As for me, there's not much I can actually do. My interactions with his family are usually restricted to indirectly talking about his tenacity and grabbing hold of their appetites with my recipes.

Since we were able to get the frames in more-or-less the right shape, in the worst-case scenario we can whittle them down if it turns out we can't actually use them. The biggest problem now is probably the mat we'll be spreading the paper on. It's a series of thin, rolled cylinders, almost like calligraphy pens, and we're going to need to make it entirely from scratch. We need both bamboo rods of equal diameter and thread. Strong thread, at that, stronger than the kind of thread that Lutz and I ordinarily have access to. Getting bamboo rods down to the right size is going to be difficult as well. Even though we're only making something postcard-sized, it's easy to see that this is going to be an extremely difficult process.

“Since we were able to make the frame today, tomorrow let’s start whittling down bamboo in order to make our rods. Although, can we actually make them round so easily, I wonder? Since we need them to be about the same size and thickness, I wonder if we should make them rectangular, instead? What do you think?”
“I can’t really say I know anything about either making or using them…”

Since I’m still not very good with my knife, I’m not particularly useful, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re going to need a lot of these, and that they need to be very thin. However, I’m still very happy, since we managed to meet our goal for the day and make our frame.

As we pass through the gates on our way home, Otto calls out to us. “Maine, ah, Lutz, too! Could you come here for a minute?”

It wouldn’t be unusual if he were just calling me over, since it could be something relating to my job as his assistant, but this is the first time he’s called Lutz over as well.

“Me too?” Lutz asks as we walk over.
“That’s right. I have a written invitation for the two of you.”

He delivers us another invitation, just like the one Corinna sent to me the other day. My studying has born fruit, and I quickly skim it, picking out who the sender and addressee are. It’s an invitation from Benno, addressed to me and Lutz.

“From Mister Benno, to me and Lutz?”
“Huh, I wonder why?” says Lutz.

I thought we wouldn’t see him again until we’d successfully made paper. I have no idea what this invitation could be about, since the two of us aren’t his apprentices yet.

“This says tomorrow,” I say, “so this must be really urgent. What could it be? …Maybe, is he rejecting us without even seeing our product?”

Perhaps someone with a stronger connection to him asked for a favor and he decided to take someone else as an apprentice, or perhaps he was able to piece something together from bits of information I’ve let slip and intends to make it himself so he

doesn't need us anymore… all of the worst-case scenarios start tumbling around in my head.

"What?!" exclaims Lutz. "Are you serious?!"
"No, no!" says Otto, quickly. "It's not that!"
I frown up at him. "Mister Otto, do you know what this is about?"
"…Aaah~, well, so after Benno saw Corinna's hair, he started hammering me for information, so I just kind of let my part in all of it slip out, so it's about all that."
"So this invitation is your fault, then! Why would you just let that slip out?!"
"Isn't it only natural for a husband to brag about how his wife has become so beautiful?"

Did he specifically go to Benno's place to brag about Corinna to get back at me for taking every last nail from him?

Although I have plenty of complaints for Otto, that doesn't change the fact that this invitation has been delivered into our hands, and since we're hoping that he'll accept us as his apprentices, this isn't something that we're going to be able to decline.

"This says we're supposedly going to meet him for lunch," I say. "I wonder if we'll be able to eat something amazing?"
"Ohh! I'm going! I'm absolutely going!!"

Lutz is suddenly one hundred percent all-in on going to this thing. A poor child who is always hungry would be dazzled in a single instant by the thought of a sumptuous meal. I'm also actually fairly interested in what rich people eat.

The written invitation also lists the time and place at which we should meet. Benno would like us to meet him at his shop, when the fourth bell chimes.

"…Where is Benno's shop?" I ask Otto. "We don't know where that is, you know?"
"It's on the first floor of my building."

Otto's home is above Corinna's family's home, and was prepared for Corinna by her much older brother who was worried about his adorable little sister. So, Corinna must be Benno's younger sister, so Otto and Benno must be…

"…Is he your brother-in-law?"
"That's right."

I guess it isn't strange at all for the things I talk about with Otto to go straight through to Benno, then. I don't really feel like saying anything more.

The next day, Lutz and I put on the nicest clothes that we can, then start heading towards Benno's shop. After we pass through the central plaza, the buildings around us start steadily becoming nicer. Lutz has never gone past the plaza to the castle walls before, so he is constantly looking around, taking in everything he can see.

"Wow, this is amazing…"
"Yeah, it's totally different, even though it's still the same town. I was super surprised as well, back when I went to Otto's house."
"If the town can change this much, I wonder if lunch is going to be this much better than what I get at home! I'm really looking forward to this."

Lutz's smile is both broad and innocent. I sigh lightly, and give him some advice.

"You should be careful about how you eat."
"Hm?"
"I think he's absolutely going to be checking our table manners, like how we eat."
"What?! I don't know anything about that, though!"

I don't know anything about it either. More accurately, I don't know whether or not I'll be able to pass my own table manners off as what they have here. We have only a single countermeasure.

"Be careful about your posture. Then, instead of just immediately shoving food into our faces, let's watch how Mister Benno does it first. I don't think it'll be a big mistake to copy what he does."
"…Aw maaan, now I'm nervous!"

Uneasy with uncertainties over what might lie in store for us, the two of us continue forward, holding hands for some reason. We arrive in front of Benno's shop well before the fourth bell has rung. Since our meeting is at the fourth bell, we need to kill some time waiting by the shop.

"What do we do now?"

“Hm? Well, since we’re already in the area, I want to take a look at the shop. I don’t know anything at all about how it’s managed, how many people work there, what apprentices do there, or anything at all, really.”
“…You’re right.”

I’m used to using the internet or magazines when it comes to researching a potential place of employment. Here, though, I have neither of those things. Instead, you have to either pick things up by word of mouth or go to see things with your own eyes. If you don’t do either of those things, you can’t get any useful information.

Normally, you’d learn about how a particular industry worked by hearing about your parents’ jobs, and then you’d learn about the place you’d be working by listening to what the person to whom you were referred had to say. However, since Otto kept the fact that he and Benno were brothers-in-law, I don’t know if he’ll let any useful information flow. When I brought Lutz to hear Otto talk about being a trader, even Benno introduced himself as “an acquaintance from when Otto was a trader”. He didn’t say a single thing about the actual job, perhaps because he had every intention of rejecting us outright. So, since I’ve got an opportunity right now to observe how this shop works right now, I want to make the most of it.

“They don’t have very many things lined up for sale,” I say.
“There’s also way fewer people going in and out than at the town market. I wonder if this shop really is profitable?”
“I think it has to be. It’s very tidy, and the employees’ appearance and manner are much nicer than shops closer to the wall, I think. Since they’re so well trained and well groomed, maybe they do business with rich people or the nobility.”

Even the man standing in front of the store like a guard is dressed in better clothing than we are. That alone is proof that this shop is frequented by those who care a lot about appearance. It seems like there are many barriers that Lutz and I will have to overcome if we want to work here, since we come from such different worlds.

Da-dong, da-donnng…

The fourth bell rings through the town, telling everyone that it is now noon. At the same time, the shop’s employees start closing everything down.

“Huh? Huh?! They’re closing down?!”

I grab Lutz by the hand, then frantically run towards Benno's shop, pulling him along behind me. If everything is closed down and everyone goes home, I'll have no idea what to actually do. I call out to the guard as he turns to head into the shop, holding up my invitation.

"Excuse meee! The two of us were invited here by Mister Benno; would you be able to tell us what we should do next, please?"
"Ah, there's no need to panic. I hear you, but would you mind waiting a bit until we've finished closing up?"

After they finish closing the shop for lunch, all of the employees head off to get some food, leaving just the one guard behind. It seems like I didn't need to call out while they were in the middle of closing the shop, I could have just greeted the guard afterward. Immediately after the shop is closed and the employees have all scattered, the guard leads us inside.

"Sir, you have guests," he says.
"Ah, show them in," comes a voice from another room.

The guard opens a door, lets us in, then closes it behind us with a respectful bow. At a single glance, it's obvious that this room is used for business discussions. The shelves around the room are lined with a variety of things that I'm not used to seeing. Behind the wooden desk at which Benno is seated are more shelves, where piles of wooden boards and scrolls have accumulated.

Are those *bookshelves*?!

There aren't any books, so it might be more accurate to call them document shelves, but those are shelves that are packed with *writing*. I start to unsteadily wander over towards them, but when Benno stands up I manage to stop myself, planting my feet firmly to the ground.

"Sorry for calling you out here on such short notice," he says. "I thought I absolutely needed to have a talk with you."
"About what, sir?"
"How about we have lunch first? We can talk afterwards."

I take the seat Benno offers me, though my line of sight to the bookshelf-like shelves is cut off. Lutz sits next to me, looking just a little bit nervous.

“I’ll have it brought right in.”

Benno picks up a small bell from the desk and rings it three times. A door at the back of the room opens, and a young woman comes out, bearing food on a tray. It seems like there must be a stairway to connect this floor to the second floor above.

“Maine, Lutz, welcome,” she says. “I hope you’ll enjoy your meal.”

I thought she might have been Benno’s wife, but since he didn’t introduce her at all, it could be that she’s one of his employees or perhaps a servant.

“Thank you very much,” is all I say as I study the tableware set out in front of me. We each have an empty plate, a fork, and a spoon. There isn’t a great difference between the amount of cutlery we’re using here and that I use at home; the only difference is that Benno is the only one with a knife in front of him. It seems like it’s the responsibility of Benno, the master of the house, to serve our plates. He serves salad and meat onto our plates, and gives us bowls of soup.

“Please, enjoy.”

Lutz had been trying his best in his own special way, but as soon as we start eating it seems like all of my advice immediately spills out of his head, and he starts shoving food into his face with great gusto.

Perhaps Lutz should also learn some table manners before we start working.

I pick up my fork, then start to eat. I keep an eye on Benno as I do, but it seems that his table manners aren’t much different from mine. Although I think this to be the case, for some reason Benno keeps studying me closely. I wonder if I’m making some sort of mistake? I eat timidly, nervous that I’m making some small errors that I just can’t notice. I don’t think I’m doing anything exceptionally rude, though, so I have no idea what he could be quite so focused on.

For today, at least, the manners I know tell me that leaving just a little bit of food left on the plate would show that I’m full to my satisfaction. I had been thinking that leaving any leftovers would be rude, so I kept eating, but at some point my mouth just clamped shut when I tried to eat any more.

I'd had some degree of expectation for a rich man's lunch, but the only real difference is in the quantity, not the flavor. It seems like their cooking methods are still the same. Yet another letdown. Lutz, however, thinks quantity is king, and looks absolutely satisfied.

"Now that our bellies are full, shall we talk?"
"Yes," I reply.

Benno sips on some dark, coffee-like beverage with an unusual scent, and we're given herbal tea as we start our conversation.

"First, I'd like to ask you something."
"What is it?"
"Why did you rely on Otto for that?"

Benno's expression and tone show both irritation and a little bit of anger. Lutz draws back, and I tilt my head to the side a little.

"I'm sorry, but I don't quite understand what you're asking. I've always relied on Otto for many things, so to what and to when are you referring?"
"Otto told me that he'd lent you nails, and that you'd exchanged that liquid you put in your hair for it, didn't you?"
"Yes. …Was there a problem with that? I don't think there was anyone else I know that I could have asked to get me nails."

I have no idea why Benno would be upset that Otto gave me nails. Perhaps he's upset that I gave him some shampoo? I sit there, head tilted to the side and not understanding at all. Benno lets out an enormous sigh.

"This is common sense to a merchant, but it would have been best for you to consult with me first."
"With you, sir?"
"That's right," he says, with a solemn nod.

It seems like it this would indeed be common sense for a merchant of this world, but I still don't understand it.

"But, the two of us aren't your apprentices yet, right? I thought that making paper was going to be our test, so asking you for help seemed to me like it would be illogical."

“Not true. If you can make that paper, then you’ll work here as an apprentice, and it’ll be a good sold through this shop. The first person you should be consulting is thus *me*, and not Otto.”

Although we’re still not officially apprentices, it seems that we should perhaps still be thinking of him as our superior, since we have a conditional employment agreement. I had thought that making paper was our test, but I should consider it to be an extension of our jobs. If I think of it like that, then this matter is simple: Benno’s sub-apprentices asked someone who was not him for assistance in a matter related to their work, which reflects poorly on him as a supervisor.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I understand what you mean. We damaged your reputation, or, rather, hurt your honor as our supervisor. We’ll be more careful of this in the future.”

Seeing that I’ve understood and reflected on my actions, Benno nods several times, then straightens up in his chair.

“Now then, let’s negotiate. I’m prepared to offer you all of the materials you think necessary to make paper in exchange for the manufacturing method for the liquid you use in your hair.”
“Huh? Making paper is our test to become your apprentices, isn’t it? Are you okay with supplying us like this?”

I thought that the test was to see if we could put everything together on our own. If Benno were to provide us with the materials we need, then our task suddenly becomes much easier.

“There’s no way that you could start a new industry like that when you have no tools, no manpower, and no prior investment. Still, you can’t be asking someone who, at least on the surface, has nothing to do with the project for assistance. If you had some form of collateral, you could get a loan, but you don’t have anything to offer, do you?”

It goes without saying, but Lutz and I, the children of poor people, have absolutely nothing we could use as collateral on a loan.

“Information isn’t something you could return to us when we’re finished, so we can’t use it as collateral, right?”

“That’s why, in this case we’re not discussing a loan, but a trade. I’m buying your recipe. In exchange, I’ll provide you with everything you need to make paper. …Surely you don’t think this is a bad deal?”
“It certainly doesn’t seem to be a bad one.”

If we commission the custom tools we need and purchase the materials through Benno’s suppliers, there’s a chance the paper manufacturing method might leak out, but for someone like me, who can’t even procure a single pot, getting this assistance would be like removing the noose from my neck.

“Lutz, what do you think?”

He’s been sitting next to me this entire time, wordlessly listening. Making paper is both of our jobs. It wouldn’t be right for me to make a decision like this without getting his input as well. However, he looks away a little bit, shaking his head.

“…Thinking about these things is your job, right? Whatever you think is fine by me.”
“Really?”

If that’s what Lutz thinks, then I should try to get us the best terms for this arrangement that I can. If Benno will agree to provide us with both tools and, of course, raw materials, then we can focus entirely on making the paper itself.

“I’d like to clarify something, sir. When you say you’ll provide us with what we need, do you mean just the tools, or does that include the raw materials as well?”
“I don’t mind if we include the materials. You want to experiment with a variety of things, correct? I heard that Lutz was asking a lumber dealer about different kinds of wood.”

That’s right, a merchant’s broad network of connections can be terrifying. If unfamiliar children are wandering around and gathering information, that news is of course going to immediately start to spread.

“How long will this support continue?”
“Until your baptismal ceremony. Before then, you can’t become apprentices, after all. To keep appearances, I’ll sell whatever you manage to bring me. From the gross, I’ll withhold the cost of the materials and the sale, plus a commission; the rest will be yours. After your baptisms, you’ll come to this shop to operate the paper trade, and ten percent of the net profits will be added to your wages as a bonus.”

There's no problem with what he's proposing for before the ceremony. We come to him with any completed paper we make, and he sells it. Even if the commission he charges is relatively high, our profits will still be assured.

However, I'm somewhat uneasy about what would happen after the ceremony. Having our share of the profits added to our wages sounds good, but, what happens if we're dismissed? If he's no longer paying us any wage, then it's possible that he won't pay us our share of the profits, either. It feels like there's an enormous gap between the common knowledge we should have in this circumstance and the knowledge we actually have from our daily lives. If paper production goes according to plan, once its profitability is realized we don't actually have any guarantees after that.

"In addition to the bonus to our wages, please let me retain the exclusive rights to manufacture the paper, and let Lutz retain the exclusive rights to sell it."
"…What do you mean?"
"Once we're able to make paper, it's possible that you'd fire us as soon as you got your hands on the actual goods, and that would be very bad for us. I would much rather have a long-term guarantee over the chance for immediate profits."

Benno's eyes briefly glimmer as he strokes his chin.

"Well, looking out for yourself wasn't bad at all. Your childish reasoning is, however, full of holes."
"Urgh… I'll have to study."

Since I still lack the necessary bits of local common sense, no matter how hard I wrack my brain, my reasoning will always still be childish.

"So, then, if we leave the rights to the paper at that, are you going to stake any claim with regards to the rights to your hair-glossing liquid?"
"No, sir, I won't contest you for the rights to my *'simple shampoo'*. I'd be selling those to you."

I have no intention of demanding rights to something I am trying to sell. To me, the circulation of paper is the best possible outcome, and I'd like to be able to offer Lutz's family some kind of guarantee of his long-term success as a merchant's apprentice, since they're still opposed to this path.

“Well, that’s fine. The various rights relating to the manufacturing and sale of the paper will be yours. However, as long as the two of you are working here, you’ll do all of your sales through this shop. You’ll have no right to determine either the price of sale or your profits, and there will be no bonus to your wages. That should cover everything, right?”
“That sounds alright to me. This is simply just insurance, after all.”

Right now, guaranteeing a place where we can work and earn a steady wage is the most important thing. I’m fine with earning our profits slowly, over the long term. Beyond just the hairpin that first caught Benno’s eye, my recipes, and even my beauty products, I can think of quite a few things off the top of my head that I can turn into serious profits if I can first get the necessary raw materials, after all.

“Alright then. That’s all for now, then. I’ll be heading out to the noblemen’s residences for the afternoon. I’ll be back in the evening, so until then, the two of you should stay here and fill out the orders for your supplies. Write out everything you’ll need in order to make your paper.”

I’m happy with how quickly our work is progressing now, but I still haven’t learned how to write up supply orders while working at the gates.

“…If I don’t know how to write a supply order?”
“I’ll have someone teach you. If you’re able to finish by this evening, I’ll show you something nice, as a prize.”
“Something nice?”
“When you are absolutely serious about ensuring your own profits, or making deals with the nobility, there is a way of forming a contract that is almost never used outside of extremely profitable, high-stakes transactions. This isn’t something either of you would have seen if you’ve just been doing your business in the town markets. This isn’t just a verbal agreement, I’ll guarantee you your rights.”

Certainly, I was hoping for a written contract, not just a verbal agreement, but I hadn’t thought Benno would be the one to bring it up.

“…Why would you go that far for us, sir? Wouldn’t it leave you in a better position if this were to remain a verbal agreement only?”

Benno shakes his head, smiling broadly.

“What I want is to promptly and contractually protect my rights to this 'simple sham-poo’. If we simply had a verbal agreement, then it would be quite problematic for me if you were to assert your own claim on it once it started to become profitable. This contract will guarantee your own rights to the paper, in exchange for completely giving up your rights to the 'sham-poo’.”
“Thank you very much.”

I wonder if he wanted to say that we shouldn’t be fully trusting each other, since the two of us have only ever met twice. If we have a written contract, then both of us can rest easy.

As the employees start returning from their lunch break one by one, Benno appoints one person to serve as our teacher for the afternoon. The prim aura of a butler practically rolls off of him, so heavily that I instinctively want to call him Sebastian.[1]

“Mark, this is Maine and Lutz. Please teach them how to write up a materials order. I’ll leave them in your care until I’m back.”
“Very well, Master Benno,” he replies.

Benno gives further directions to the other employees as he gets ready to leave. As he heads out the door, he stops briefly and turns his head to call out to Mark.

“Ah, I almost forgot. Mark, while I’m out, get everything set up for the contract magic.”

Contract magic?
I think I heard him correctly.
Huh? Was this… a fantasy… setting?

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. “Sebastian” is the name of the title character from the anime Black Butler. He is a butler.

Chapter 30
Contract Magic

At Mark's request, one of the female employees clears off the table in front of us. As she does so, he brings over a platter, bearing various things. It might be more accurate to call the thing he's holding a "tray", but since he's so incredibly butler-like, it's difficult to refer to the round, flat, wooden disk as anything but a platter.

Mark sets out the objects he brought on the table in front of us: a number of thin boards, a pot of ink, some kind of pen made from something like bamboo or reed, a slate, a slate pencil, and a cloth. He lines them up perfectly, without the slightest bend in the line, then looks up at us.

"Now then, I shall teach you how to write a materials order."
"Thank you very much," I reply.
"Th… thank you," mumbles Lutz.

Mark glances back and forth between the two of us, comparing us.

"Lutz, are you able to write?"
"…I can just write my name."

It seems that Lutz has held on to the name-writing lesson I taught him back when we were making clay tablets. However, the writing we'll need to do here isn't just limited to one's own name, so he turns away to hide an embarrassed expression. Mark nods once, with a thoughtful hum, then picks up the slate and places it neatly in front of Lutz.

"You say that you are able to write your name? I had heard that you were not the children of merchants, so… you've surprised me. You'll have no problems with the contract. However, if you were to work as an apprentice here, you would be expected to know how to write every letter. While Maine and I work on preparing the materials order, why don't we have you practice writing some basic letters?"

It seems that Mark had thought Lutz, having not come from a merchant family, wouldn't be able to write his own name, and had planned on having him learn how so that he could sign the contract. Changing his plans, he writes five or so letters on top

of the slate, and has Lutz start practicing those. I wonder if he's in charge of teaching the apprentices how to write? He seems very used to this teaching method.

"Maine, are you able to write?"
"There are definitely words that I won't know, but if you can teach me those, I'll be able to write them."
"Very well."

Mark places two boards in front of me, one with nothing written on it at all, and one that already has some things on it. Some sort of copybook, perhaps. There are a few words I don't understand, but I can read about seventy percents of it.

"This reads 'order for goods'," he says, indicating the words at the very top. He also teaches me about the general format of the document. Once he shows me the words for "ordering proprietor", "goods requested", and "quantity requested", the rest of it is not particularly difficult.

"Now then, do you know what materials and tools you need to order?"
"Yes, sir."

With a big nod, I start to write. The board clatters as I write on it, though, making it harder than I thought it was going to be. On top of that, this unfamiliar pen is very difficult to write with, making this rather unpleasant. Compared to a pen like this, the soot pencils I made were far easier to write with, although the letters did crumble and smudge into an illegible mess of black at the slightest touch.

"Urgh," I say, "this is so different from writing on a slate."
"You're doing very well for your first time," says Mark.

Being praised like that lifts my spirits, and I press on. As my pen slides crisply across the board, Mark looks over my shoulder at what I'm ordering, frowning slightly.

"…Maine, we can purchase a pot, but how big do you need it to be?"
"Ummm… I think one the same size as the second-biggest one we have at my house would be okay, but…"

Mark's frown deepens. It's clear to see that my explanation did nothing to clear things up for him.

Right, I see. There's no way he'd know what I meant when I'd talk about my family's pots, right? However, I have no idea how to express the size of the pot I want. I don't think they use centimeters here, so how should I explain it?

"Hey, Lutz," I say. "About how big is the pot you use to carry water?"
"Hm? Oh, um… about this big," he says, making a circle with his arms.

After I pass the buck completely to a little kid… ahem, ahem, I mean, after I ask Lutz, the most knowledgable expert on the matter for his opinion, Mark immediately takes out something like a tape measure and quickly measures the circle Lutz has made.

"And its depth?" he asks.
"Lutz, how deep is it?"
"About this deep," says Lutz, spreading out his hands. Again, Mark takes a quick measurement.

Since there's never been any sort of measuring device around, until now I've been doing all of my measurement by eye. There's never been any need for anything precise. However, although that might be fine when we're making things on our own, when we're placing orders for other people to fill, that kind of ambiguity is unacceptable. I hold my head in my hands, and let out a small groan.

I raise my hand, looking at Mark. "…Mister Mark, before I write out this order, would you please teach me the units of measurement for length?"
"Of course," he replies.
"Also, after we leave today, we won't be able to place any more orders since we don't have any way to make measurements ourselves. Could you lend us a measuring tape?"

If we can't measure the frame that we've already built, we can't make the paper mat.

"Let us order a tape measure for you as well. It seems like you'll be needing one now."

When we're making trial runs in order to determine things like the types of wood we'll need and the mixing ratios we'll be using, we'll be making postcard-sized sheets. However, when we've managed to perfect it, we'll be making much larger sheets. When we do, we will, of course, need larger tools. A measuring device is necessary.

Mark lends me a measuring tape. As he explains how to use it, I start working on writing out the order.

Steamer, pot, squared timber, ashes, tub, paper frame, drying bed, weights, flat board. Also, raw wood and sunset hibiscus sap.

Since I want to start making paper as soon as I can, I want to list out absolutely everything right now, but until we actually get our pot, I don't know how big the steamer will need to be. And, if we don't know how big the steamer will be, we don't know how large the wood we'll need the wood to be, either.

I describe the squared timber to Mark and explain how it's used, and we decide how large and heavy it will need to be. For the ashes, we don't know how much we'll need until we actually try making paper, so for now we order a small bag of it. For the rest of what we need, I wrack my brain madly, trying to figure out how best to explain it.

"Aaargh, this is hard. For the paper mat, I actually want to bring the frame we've already made directly to the craftsman and talk with him myself."
"I agree," replies Mark. "I'm not entirely certain what would would serve well as this paper mat that you describe. Even after looking at this diagram you've drawn for me, I still don't quite understand it."

Aside from the paper mat, which made even Mark give up, we somehow manage to get everything else written into out into an order.

As I've been grappling with this supply order, Lutz has been valiantly practicing his letters. I'm actually shocked to see that, even though I'm fairly certain he's not used to sitting down and working for long periods like this, he's showing an amazing ability to concentrate. This is very different from the apprentice soldiers that came to study at the gates. It's only natural, though: of course you'll be able to concentrate harder on something you think is important to you.

However, Lutz's facial expression is completely blank. I wonder if he's been pushing himself too hard?

"Now then, since we still have some time remaining, how about you learn how to calculate? Here, we add our sums using calculators like this."

After taking a brief break, Mark starts instructing Lutz in how to use a calculator. Since I don't how to use calculators in this world either, I sit next to him, watching and listening as well. As I mentally compare this simple device with an abacus, Mark

briefly pauses his explanation and looks at me, head cocked slightly to one side in curiosity.

“Maine, aren’t you already able to do calculations? I have heard as much from the master.”
“Oh, I, don’t actually use a calculator.”
“Then, how do you perform your calculations?”
“I do them on my slate.”

On my slate, I start working out by hand the calculations Mark gives me. He calls my ability to work out large out large sums unbelievable, so, somehow, I wind up teaching him a little bit about how to do complex calculations by hand.

“If you have a calculator,” he says, “you wouldn’t need to know how to *'work things out by hand’*, as you call it, correct?”
“There are times when you *don’t* have a calculator, and it’s useful then. Also, though I can see how you use a calculator, I don’t actually know how it produces those numbers. It’s very interesting to me.”

I marvel at Mark, who seems completely mystified by an arithmetic lesson usually reserved for elementary school students. The things I think of as completely obvious aren’t completely obvious at all. Once again, I’m struck by how awesome Japan’s public education system is.

Maybe it would be a good idea to not spread around this kind of thing too much?

In my view, sharing knowledge is a good thing, but I don’t know if that meshes well with how things are commonly done in this world. Perhaps I’ve gone a little bit overboard, this time.

“It’s almost time for the master to return. I’ll start making arrangements for the contract magic.”
“What’s 'contract magic’?”

I can’t stop my heart from pounding when I hear those words, the first fantasy-sounding thing I’ve heard since coming here. I had never even considered that a world

as filthy and unpleasant as this one could possibly contain something as fantastical as magic.

Could I maybe use magic too? Is that my reincarnation-story-protagonist cheat?! Exhilarated, I sit on the edge of my seat, waiting for Mark's answer.

He chuckles at me. "Magic, as you know, is something that only the nobility possess."
"…Only the nobility?"
"Yes, that's right. Since it's so rare for people like us to see, it's not something that we understand very well."

In an instant, my joy at having found myself in a fantasy world is smashed to bits.

Only the nobility have magic? What the hell. They're not just keeping books from me, but magic too? Those damn *aristocrats*.

"Contract magic was originally created as a way to keep the more violent noblemen in check. To perform it, you need a special ink and paper. If you write and execute a contract with those, then you'll be bound to the terms of the contract by magic. It's a powerful way to ensure that neither party breaks the terms of their agreement."
"Huhhh, that really is convenient."

A contract, guaranteed by magic, that can't just be torn up and ignored seems very useful indeed.

"It's convenient, but the paper and ink are magic tools, and are thus both very rare and very expensive, so it isn't used except for the most profitable contracts."

I see. Somehow, it seems that Benno sees a tremendous amount of profit in my simple shampoo.

Certainly, consumable products have that kind of power. If you run out of them, then you'll need to get more. I can't imagine a woman out there who would ever let their supply run out once they got used to having glossy, silky hair. This is doubly true for those women with money, like the noblewomen who put so much effort into their appearances.

…Did I perhaps sell this for too cheaply?

As soon as that thought flashes through my head, I remember that it's not good to be too greedy. What Lutz and I need are security, stability, and a firm financial footing. I should focus on securing that.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," says Benno, walking quickly as he walks through the door of the shop. It seems like he was actually concerned about how long we were waiting.

"Are you finished with the materials order?"
"We've written up what we can for now."

I indicate the pile of boards that we've accumulated behind me. "That's a lot," he murmurs. There's still stuff we need to measure, Benno, so there'll be even more soon. We're counting on you.

"How is Lutz doing?" asks Benno.

Mark proudly places his hand on his chest as he answers. "He was already able to write his name when we began, so ever since then he has been devoted to learning how to write beyond that. This young man has an excellent memory."
"Ah, I see."

Even though Mark is praising him, Lutz only manages a small nod of acknowledgement, as if there's something big on his mind. He's spent a full half of a day studying, so it's likely that he's quite tired by now. Doing something you're not used to is very exhausting, after all.

"Mark must have explained this by now, but for this contract magic we use a paper specifically used for contracts and a special kind of ink. This is something that only merchants who've been approved to work with the nobility can use."

Benno takes out a small ink bottle with a peculiar design. At a glance, it looks like it contains regular ink, but it seems like it must be something completely different. As I watch him intently, Benno neatly spreads the blank contract out on the table in front of him.

"…Is it okay for you to be using that? It looks very rare and expensive."
"I wouldn't be using it if I didn't think this was a very important contract. Don't worry about it."

…If you tell me not to worry about it, I'll worry about it.

Benno dips a pen into the inkwell, then smoothly begins to write out the terms of the contract. The ink is actually not black, but a rich blue. As Benno fills the page with neat, practiced handwriting, I follow along closely.

Maine agrees to transfer all rights to her Simple Shampoo to Benno.
In exchange, Benno agrees to assume all costs of the paper-making enterprise to be undertaken by Maine and Lutz, until the date of their baptismal ceremony.
Maine will retain all rights relating to the manufacturing of the paper, and Lutz will retain all rights to the sale of the paper.
However, they will retain neither the right set the sales price of the paper, nor the right determine their profits.

Maine carefully reads the contents of the contract from end to end, verifying that nothing strange has been written. This, however, is only a pretense. In reality, I'm taking this time to deeply inhale the intoxicating scent of fresh ink on paper.

Aaah, I want to make paper, then make books, so badly…

"…Is there some sort of problem?" asks Benno, incredulously.

With a sigh, I come back to my senses. I turn to face a suspicious Benno and an amazed Lutz. I think Lutz might have realized that I was captivated by the smell of the ink.

"Wha?! Ev… everything looks fine! You've written things out just like we talked about them, so there's no problems."
"…I'm fine, too," says Lutz.

Benno nods, then dips the pen into the inkwell once more.

At the bottom of the contract, Benno signs his name. He spins the pen around and offers it to me. I exchange a brief glance with Lutz, then accept it.

I run a finger across the parchment. It's so much softer than the paper I'm used to. Satisfied, I adjust my grip on the pen. I carefully dip it into the inkwell, letting the nib absorb just enough ink so that a tiny bead forms on its tip. I sign my name just beneath Benno's. Unlike writing on those wooden boards, this is a very pleasant surface to write on.

Writing on paper feels far better than those boards, after all…

“Your turn, Lutz.”

Lips pressed together in concentration, Lutz takes the pen from me, dips the pen in the inkwell, and writes his name below mine. The blockiness of his handwriting betrays how unused to writing he is, but he still writes his name clearly and legibly.

“Now then…”
“Aaah! Mister Benno?!”

Benno abruptly pulls out a knife and slashes open his own finger. As Lutz and I watch on, startled, a drop of blood wells up on his fingertip. He smears it onto another finger, then presses down on top of his signature, sealing it with his blood. As he presses his finger tightly to the contract, the bright red blood is absorbed into the paper. In that instant, the blue ink of his signature abruptly turns deep black.

This is some scary magic, yikes!

“Right, and next is…”

Benno looks over at me. I’m paralyzed with fear, staring at the bright red drop of blood that lingers on Benno’s knife. Lutz looks over at me, sighs, then takes out his own knife.

“Give me your hand, Maine…”
“Eek!”

I shove my hands behind my back without thinking about it at all.

“Maine, you can’t do it yourself, right?”
“Th… that’s right, but…”

Cutting open my own finger is scary, but having someone else do it is scary too. I really hate pain.

“Whose idea was it to make this contract?” he says, patiently.
“M… mine…”

Steeling myself, I close my eyes tightly, then timidly extend my hands. Quickly, Lutz deftly slices open the tip of my left pinky. Blood starts to trickle down my finger, accompanied by a sharp, hot, stinging pain.

“Spread that blood to your thumb, then press it into the contract,” says Benno.
“Nnngh… guh!”

Trying very hard not to cry, I smear some blood on my thumb, then press it firmly onto the contract, where I’ve signed it. Just like Benno’s, the ink immediately turns pitch black. While Mark stops the bleeding and wraps a small cloth around my pinky, Lutz unhesitatingly cuts open his own finger and leaves his own bloody seal on the contract.

How can he do that without even flinching?! Isn’t that scary?!

As soon as Lutz’s hand leaves the paper, the ink of the contract shines with a brilliant light, as if it’s burning. Spreading from the ink itself, a hole opens up in space, then snaps shut, taking the entire sheet of parchment with it. Even though I saw it happen right in front of my very own eyes, I can’t help but think it’s exactly like some CG you’d find in a movie.

…Wow, this really is fantasy. I can’t believe that I’ve been living in a fantasy world!

As I marvel over this strange new way of signing a contract, I suddenly notice that the contract has completely disappeared, and snap back to my senses.

Aren’t I supposed to get a copy of this?

“And, with that, the contract is complete. Violating is is a deadly matter, so don’t do it, okay?”

“Deadly?!” I shout, terrified by his dreadful words.
He looks down at me with a broad, amused smile. “Well, if you don’t violate it, you’ll do just fine. But, this is the kind of guarantee you wanted, isn’t it?”
“…Thank you very much,” I say. “I’m very grateful.”

In the end, I didn’t get a copy for myself.

With the contract magic complete, Lutz and I leave Benno’s shop. By now, the sun is quite low in the sky, and I watch it slowly sink towards the horizon, its golden hue gradually dimming to red. Lutz and I walk back the way we came, through streets that seem so different in the evening glow.

“It’s later than I thought,” I say. “Let’s get home quickly.”

The people around us seem to be in a hurry to get home as well, walking with a bit of extra speed. As we’re carried along by the wave of traffic, I turn to Lutz.

“Today was super exhausting, huh?”
“…Yeah.”

There’s still more material orders for us to write up, but, the orders that I spent so much time filling out today are going to be processed, we’ll get our materials, and we’ll be able to devote ourselves solely to making paper. On top of that, the contract magic means that Lutz and I have guaranteed our rights. When we finish perfecting our paper, we won’t get abruptly fired from the shop.

“Now, we just need to make this paper, then we’re totally secure, Lutz!”
“…Mm.”

Lutz’s tongue is so heavy that I can barely hear his response before it disappears amongst the noise of the crowd. Usually, we talk a lot as we walk, to distract from the fact that I’m so slow. I wonder why his responses are so dull right now.

I wonder if this wore him out more than going to the forest? Maybe memorizing letters and learning how to do calculations doesn’t really agree with him?

I look over at Lutz as he walks beside me. His blond hair glows a brilliant red in the evening sun. As I look up at him, though, I can't really make out the expression on his face through the shadow that falls across it.

"Hey, Lutz. What's wrong?"

Even though I ask, Lutz doesn't reply. He opens his mouth a little, looking like he almost wants to say something, but he immediately snaps it tightly shut. He hangs his head a little, as if he's brooding over something. Like that, we walk in silence for a while.

Lutz always slows down for me, acting like my pace-setter. I wonder if we're walking at Lutz's natural speed right now? I'm almost having to jog to keep up. He's acting so differently compared to how he normally is. I'm getting a very bad feeling about this.

"Wait, Lutz."

We stop in the central plaza, and Lutz immediately turns to look away from me. He presses his lips tightly together, then turns to look at me. His face, half-shrouded in shadow from the evening sun, is deadly serious. Looking like he's gathered all of his resolve, he opens his mouth, and speaks in a cracked voice.

"You… you're Maine, right?"
"Huh?"

My breath catches in my throat. In an instant, all the blood in my body turns ice cold, and a heavy weight clamps down on my heart. The sounds of the bustling plaza fade away, replaced by a deafening ringing in my ears, pounding with each rush of blood through my veins.

"If you're really Maine, then… how could you talk like that?"
"Like how?"
"Like how you talked to the shopkeeper today. I didn't even understand half of it. Hearing Maine talk about things I don't know anything about, and keeping up with an adult… it's strange."

The ringing in my ears continues. I gulp nervously as I listen to him.

"Hey. You're really Maine, right?" he says, looking for confirmation.

I force down the prickling in my throat. I tilt my head way over to the side doubtfully, pretending like I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about it.

"Well, um… Lutz, do I look like I'm not Maine?"
"…My bad. That was a weird thing to say. …I was just a little surprised to see you talking like an adult."

Lutz manages to put something like a smile on his face, then starts walking again.

I stand there, mutely, strange thoughts turning over in my head. When I notice Lutz's figure slowly growing smaller in the distance, I start moving forward as well.

…I messed up, didn't I.

That's right. I haven't interacted with very many people so far. Since I don't have any strength or stamina, I haven't been useful for much of anything. I've been working as Otto's assistant, but for that, I've been at most a child that's uncommonly good at calculations, and none of the kids I know ever come in contact with me while I'm there.

What I've done with Lutz has basically just been making clay tablets and carving wood. Even if my motives were strange, that's still something a child could actually do, so my doing so wouldn't be particularly suspicious.

However, today I showed off a speaking ability as good as Benno's, and fought very hard to secure a position for me and Lutz. I fought *too* hard. I'm sure that Lutz didn't see in me today a trace of the weak, frail Maine that he has to protect from everything.

As we start making paper in earnest, the number of arguments with adults I'll need to have is only going to increase. When we're having tools made for us, I'm going to need to be able to lay out proposals and give clear directions. I'm going to have to do more and more un-childlike things, but this is what I have to do in order to obtain paper for myself.

I'm going to drift farther and farther away from the Maine that Lutz knows, I think. As Lutz and I work together, he's only going to grow more and more convinced that I'm not actually Maine. This isn't that far off.

What would Lutz think if he knew this?

What should I, who am not Maine, do now?

As we return home, Lutz's face is hidden in the shadows of twilight. I can't bring myself to walk at his side.

Chapter 31
Lutz's Most Important Duty

Even long after we've returned home, Lutz's words tumble around in my head. It looked like they were hard for him to say, but the fact that he was able to say them so clearly means that he holds some significant doubts in his heart.

What would he say if he knew I really wasn't Maine?

"Give Maine back," he would scream, "it's your fault she's gone!", mixing his confusion, his anger, his *fear* into a deluge of verbal abuse. And if he tells my family about it, then I'd suddenly have nowhere to belong.

I'd be driven from my home or even, in the worst case, subjected to this world's equivalent of a witch hunt. Their religion may tell them that I've been possessed by a demon, so they'll torture, maim, and kill me.

I shiver as all of the things I've read about witch hunts and the tortures they involve flicker through my head.

…I hate painful things. I hate scary things. If it looked like I was going to be tortured, I think I'd want to die instead.

Getting driven out or getting tortured would both be terrible, but before that happens, I could just let myself be swallowed up by my fever. The only pain there would be whatever would seep through the feverish delirium as I died. I have a simple way to throw away my life at a single though without anyone being able to say otherwise.

I'd rather die than be tortured.

It's hasty, but being carried away by fever sounds way more comfortable than being tortured. When I think about it like that, I can breathe just a little bit easier.

On top of that, now that I'm thinking about it, what made me fight back against the fever and struggle to remain in this world was the fact that I'd made a promise to Lutz. I told myself that I had a promise to keep, and drove my fever away.

I apologized to him, then introduced him to Otto, so I think I can tentatively say that I no longer have any regrets. After meeting with Benno and seeing that making paper is almost in my grasp, I realized that I wanted to make paper, and wanted to make books, but I don't actually have any particular attachment to anything else in this world.

It would be very simple for Lutz to avoid the me who is not Maine if I disgust him, but if he does that, then the paper-making project won't succeed. If I can explain things clearly, then I think it's likely that Lutz will come along quietly until we finish making paper and finish getting hired as apprentice merchants.

If I can somehow manage to keep things together until we successfully make some paper, then I can die whenever I want.

Now that I've prepared myself for that, I feel much more at ease. It's not the most conclusive conclusion I've come up with, but it's the best compromise I've come up with.

I don't particularly care when it's time for me to die, but if I want to die without any regrets at all, I need to focus all of my efforts into making paper.

I may have *said* that I've prepared myself for the worst, but that doesn't mean that I have no reluctance at all to meet with Lutz again. The next morning, I meet him outside, just a little bit nervous.

"I'm going to the forest today," he says. "I've got to bring back a bunch of firewood."

My face lights up when I hear him say that. Today, I have to head to Benno's shop to write up the remaining material orders and instruct him in the manufacturing process for my simple shampoo. If Lutz isn't going to be there, this is the chance to get as many of the suspicious things that I need to do out of the way now, buying me some time.

"Got it," I reply. "I'm going to Benno's shop today. I need to place the order for the paper mat, and I'm going to need to talk with him about where our supplies are going to be delivered."
"…You're going by yourself?"
"Yeah, I think so…?"

If Lutz can't come with me, then I've got no choice to go alone today. Plus, since today's primary order of business will be to dealing with adults, then it's very convenient if nobody I'm particularly close to is there today.

"…You're *able to* go by yourself?"
"Oh, I'm all right."

Lutz clenches his fist tightly, looking like he wants to say something. However, he heads off to the forest without saying anything but "see you".

I've been to Benno's shop once. Twice, if you include when I went to Otto's home. Going there by myself shouldn't be any trouble at all. Carrying my slate, slate pencils, and set of material forms with me in my tote bag, I set off for Benno's shop.

Alright, so! Let's get as many things out of the way as I possibly can today!

"Good morning," I say as I enter the shop. Merchant's bustle about frantically, and customers constantly stream in and out of the shop. I make a beeline straight for Mark, the only person whose face I know. "Ah, Mister Mark! Would Mister Benno happen to be in? I've brought some more order forms with me." "The master is busy right now, so I'd be happy to take them from you."

I pull out the set of order forms from my bag and place them in his outstretched hand, along with the ink and measuring tape he lent me.

"I've filled out these orders, but as I mentioned yesterday, if possible I'd like to explain how I'd like them to be made. Would it be possible for us to decide on the best day to do so now?"
"The lumber dealer will be more free during the morning. How about we head there now?"
"Is that okay?" I ask. "The shop's so busy, though."

Mark looks around the room at the other employees as they deal with customer after customer streaming through the shop. His mouth turns up into a smile, much like Otto's, emanating a hint of a black aura.

“The employees here are very well trained; I’m sure nobody would shed a tear if I were to step out for a moment.”

There are a few of them that look like they’re on the verge of tears already, though?

“Also,” he continues, “as Master Benno told me, your requests are a special case. I do not have anything else I need to be doing at the moment, so he has determined that I am well-suited to assist you in this. Please, do not worry about me.”
“Ummm, then, thank you for helping!”

Mark and I head out from the shop. It seems that the lumberyard we’re heading to is near the west gate, where the town market is. Since the west gate is close to the river, most large goods are brought in through there. It’s probably a very convenient place for a lumber dealer to set up his shop.

“I had some things that I was hoping to ask Mister Benno, but since it seems that he’s busy, may I ask you instead, Mister Mark?”
“What is it?”

As we walk along the main road towards the central plaza, I start to ask about the things I wasn’t able to while we were in the store.

“I was hoping that you could lend us a storehouse or workshop that we could use to store the materials we’ve ordered.”

It’s all well and good that we can place order after order for whatever we need, but we have no place to put any of it.

Mark blinks. “Where had you been planning to work before?” he asks, as if he hadn’t even considered the possibility that we didn’t already have a workshop.
“We were planning on splitting storing the tools between our two houses, and then we were going to bring everything either to the well or to the river in the forest to work…”

Originally, when we were planning on borrowing a pot from our families, we figured that we could essentially find substitutes for whatever we needed either in our houses or in the forest. We were thinking that we’d be able to beg our mothers for the ashes we’d need, and in the forest we’d be able to cut and then immediately use any wood we’d need.

If we don't have to substitute things, we save a lot of time and effort, but the sheer amount of baggage we'll have immediately increases. We'll also have a lot more raw material to store, beyond just what we'd be using in a single day. However, neither Lutz's home nor mine has very much extra space in it, so I don't think that either of our families would let us store a bunch of stuff not actually necessary for daily life in there.

"There's a limit to what we can store between the two of us," I explain, "and it's difficult to work like that. It would be best if we could borrow a workshop, so I thought I should ask you about it, since there's nothing to lose. Wouldn't you say this is also part of your initial investment?"

As I talk, Mark rubs his temples, muttering about how unbelievable this is.

"You were planning to do something much more unreasonable than I'd originally thought," he says.
"We haven't had the support of any adults so far," I remind him.

There's only so much that children can do without the cooperation of adults. Now that I've traded my simple shampoo for Benno's support, I fully intend to use it to its maximum potential. If I let this opportunity slip, I don't think I'll have a second chance to try to make paper, so I can't let things like restraint or discretion hold me back.

"Hmm, I'll see what I can do to secure a storehouse for you."
"Thank you very much. With you on our side, Mister Mark, I have a feeling we'll definitely be able to get a storehouse for sure."

Based on what I saw last time, I think Mark might be something like Benno's second-in-command or right-hand man. (Because he looks so butler-y.) If Mark is the one doing the negotiating, there's no problem at all. He'll definitely be able to get us a storehouse.

"Do you have any special requirements for the storehouse?"
"Ummm, since there are a lot of things that we're going to need to go to the forest to do, it would be nice if it could be near the south gate. Besides that, as long as it has a roof and can hold the things we're ordering, anything is good."
"I understand. …Ah, there they are. That lumberyard over there."

He points at something ahead of him, but at my height, I can't see anything. I try hopping up and down, but I still can't see over the crowds. I grab his hand and quicken my pace.

"Right, let's hurry!"

Exuberantly, I turn towards where Mark is pointing, and break into a bit of a jog. In the next instant, my knees collapse, and my consciousness smash-cuts to black.

When I come to, I'm in a completely unfamiliar room.

Thanks to the thick covers of the bed I'm in, there's no prickling from the straw mattress beneath me. It's a very nice, comfortable bed. The ceiling is simple, but it's been carefully kept clean. I don't recognize it at all.

"…Where, am I?"

I sit up in bed and look around. Nearby, I see Corinna, working on some needlework. When she hears my voice, she stops working and immediately runs over to me.

"Maine, you're awake? Benno came in carrying you, saying that you'd suddenly collapsed in the street. I was so surprised! I heard from Otto that you used to not even be able to walk to even walk to the gate in the morning without having to rest until noon, so since you didn't have a fever I thought you must just be tired and I let you sleep here for a while."
"Th… thank you very much for your care, ma'am! I am very sorry for the inconvenience!"

Eeek! On top of the bed, I breathlessly prostrate myself before her in apology.[1] It seems like I collapsed in a heap on the way to the lumberyard, so I was carried here to Corinna's house thanks to Benno. I've really imposed heavily on these people. If my mother or Tory hear about this, there will be no end to their scolding.

Aaaaaargh, I need to deeply apologize to Mark too! I'm sure he must have had a heart attack when I spontaneously collapsed in the middle of an ordinary conversation.

I think I now know why I collapsed. First, I didn't get very much sleep last night, since I stayed up far too late brooding over Lutz's words. Then, I got a little bit overenthusiastic when I decided to finish as much of the negotiations as possible today when Lutz wasn't around. On top of that, since it looks like my paper-making is starting to go really well, I've been so inspired that I haven't actually been paying attention to the condition of my own body. And, since I didn't have anybody near me to pay attention to my health for me, I didn't have anyone to stop me from overdoing it.

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is *extremely* weak. My body is a real piece of junk.

"Maine, what are you doing? You don't need to apologize for that. I'll go contact my brother. I wanted to let your family know as well, but it seems that they weren't around…"

Today, I don't think anyone should be at home, so it's only natural that they'd be hard to get hold of. On top of that, my family thinks that Lutz is out there with me. I don't think they would have even imagined that I'd go out to Benno's shop by myself, then just spontaneously collapse. Just imagining my father, so worried that he flies into a rage, is terrifying to the point where I don't even want to imagine the magnitude of my mother's wrath when she finds out how much I've inconvenienced Corinna.

"Ummm, Miss Corinna. C… can you please keep this a secret from my family?"
"Maine…?"
"My family thinks that I'm out with Lutz right now, so they'll get really angry at him…"

I try to use Lutz as a shield to negotiate an escape from my family's wrath, but Corinna only smiles, a smile so sweetly radiant that it's almost like that of a goddess.

"Now, now, they'll get mad at you anyway."
"Noooooo……"

As I'm assaulted by expectations of how awful my scolding is going to be, loud footsteps approach before Benno bursts into the room. His reddish-brown eyes narrow sharply as he glares at me.

"Little girl," he says, in a low voice.
"Fwah!!"

With a snap, I sit up perfectly straight, kneeling on the bed.

“You took some years off my life, there.”

It feels like *my* lifespan is being eroded away by his threatening glare. All my conditioning takes over, and bow down, pressing my forehead into the mattress.

“I am extremely sorry and beg your forgiveness!”
“…What are you doing?”
“This is a *‘dogeza’*, how I show that my apology is of the utmost sincerity!”
“Ah, I see.”

He sits down next to me on the bed, ruffling his milk tea-colored hair as he scratches his head.

“I’d heard a bit from Otto about how frail you were, but I had no idea it was this bad.”
“Neither did I,” I reply.
“Hm?”

I got greedy, thinking that I could somehow manage to get by without Lutz there. When I decided that I’d be fine if I was only doing this much, I was unconsciously judging things based on my old body. Since I’m in Maine’s body now, it’s only natural that I’d collapse.

“The problem was that I thought I could do anything, as long as I had the drive to do it.”
“Well, okay,” he mutters to himself, turning to look at me. “From now on, only come here with that kid. I won’t approve if you go out alone again.”
“…Yes, sir.”

I didn’t expect that I’d collapse just because I didn’t have Lutz nearby to serve as my pacemaker. I figured that since I am now able to make it all the way to the forest under my own power, then I’d be fine walking anywhere as long I was in town. I made too light of my situation.

“Go home for today. Mark’s worried about you, so take him with you.”
My eyes go wide. “Umm?! That’s too much for me to ask. I need to apologize to him and then I can go home by myself!”

I wave my hands frantically, trying to refuse. I couldn't possibly impose on Mark any more than I have already. However, Benno's face goes tight, and he glares at me with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Didn't I just say I don't approve of you going out alone? Did you hear me the first time?"
"…Yes, I did. I understand. I'll go home with Mark, even if it upsets him. Ummm, but, since I've finally managed to see you, I'd like to tell you about how to make my *'simple'*—"

As I open my mouth to try and explain my main reason for coming here today, Benno grabs my head in one hand, a terrible look on his face.

"Now! Lis! Ten! Here!"
"Yes?!"
"I, told, you, to *go home!*"
"Eeek!"

As he yells at me, my head firmly in his grip, I tremble in fear. Tears well up in my eyes on reflex as I look up at him, but in the recesses of my mind, a dispassionate thought comes to life. Ah, I see. This is what truly being yelled at is like.

"From now on, you are prohibited from entering my shop without that boy with you! If your memory works at all, *remember this*!"
"I got it! I'll remember! Ow! Owowowowow!!"

After that, I had a bit of a discussion with Mark about whether I could walk home or whether he'd carry me, but he first said, kindly, "I don't want my heart to stop like that again, so please come along quietly," then, when I tried to insist on walking, he asked, "did your apology just now mean nothing?" and I decided there was no way I would win.

Giving up my futile resistance, I allowed Mark to pick me up, and was carried home. When we got to my home, my family saw me being carried by Mark and extracted a report of my actions for the day from him and, as I expected, they got angry. In the middle of their enormous lecture, my fever flared up with full force, and I was stuck in bed for two more days.

"So, basically, since I was such a hindrance and made everyone so mad, please come with me to the shop today."

The day after my fever subsided, I explain my circumstances to Lutz, and ask if he'd accompany me to the shop. He stares at me, completely stunned, then lets out a huge, huge sigh.

"Haaahhh~… Didn't I tell you? I asked if you really could make it there, and you said it was okay. That wasn't okay at all, was it?"
"Is… is, uh, is that what you meant? I was thinking you were asking if I remembered how to get there… Lutz?!"
"Ahahaha! What kind of crazy world do you live in that you'd think that's what I meant? I'm always thinking about your health, aren't I?!"

I pout at Lutz, lips pursed, as he bends over in riotous laughter. He looks up at me, smiling so wide that it looks like his face might break.

"If you're collapsing like that, you really shouldn't go there without me," he says.
"Yeah. Mister Benno actually banned me from entering his shop if I don't have you there too."
"Ahahaha! You got banned?!"

I've been reminded of just how useless I am, so I'm feeling rather depressed right now, but for some reason Lutz is in an excellent mood. I'm glad he's not in a *bad* mood, but I kind of want an explanation.

I'd stayed up so late, worrying so much about what he'd said, and I thought that seeing him again was going to be so difficult, so why is he acting like he always does?!

"Hey, Maine. Stop sulking, let's get out of here."

Just like always, Lutz starts acting like my big brother, pulling me along as we start walking towards Benno's shop.

"Lutz, what did you get when you went to the forest the other day?"
"Firewood and some bamboo. Didn't you say that you wanted to whittle some bamboo down into something so that you could show it to some craftsmen?"

“Now that you say it, I did. I forgot!”

After Mark wasn’t able to understand what I was talking about, no matter how I described it or how many diagrams I drew on my slate, we’d decided that Lutz and I should come up with a physical example. I’d completely forgotten.

“Hey, hey, keep it together!”
“Lutz, you’re here to keep it together for me, so everything’s just fine.”

In a world without notebooks, there’s no way I can remember literally everything. I’m a notebook *fiend*. I used to always carry a notebook with me, and write down literally everything so that I wouldn’t forget it. If I took good enough notes, it wouldn’t matter if I couldn’t remember something, so I guess I became so reliant on always having my notes on hand that my memory might actually have been pretty bad.

As I tell him that we’re not going to forget anything if we’ve got each other, Lutz suddenly looks like he’s almost about to cry.

“…Um, Maine, when I saw that you’re so good at writing, and that you can do all that math, and that you can talk with the adults about all those things I don’t understand, I got really sad.”
“Huh?”
“I started thinking, what am I really good for? Like, maybe I’m not going to be any help in that shop at all.”

There’s no way that anyone in that shop would expect a kid who hasn’t even been baptized to be immediately useful. Lutz can already write his name, and he studied very hard, so I’m sure they think highly of him. It seems like he didn’t notice that at all, and was only depressing himself by comparing himself to me.

As I console him, telling him that there’s no need to compare himself to me so much, he looks up at me, smiling just a little bit.

“But hey, Maine, you collapse a lot, and even though you’re really smart you forget things, and you’re not strong at all, and you’re really tiny, and now that I think about it there’s a lot of things that you actually can’t do. Like, you’re even banned from going to that shop without me there too…”
“That’s so mean! There’s some things I can do, you know!”

As I protest the way he's describing me, for whatever reason he clutches his stomach, nearly falling over as he's laughing so hard. He calms down after a while, then puts his hand on my head, ruffling my hair.

"The other day, when I said that you weren't really Maine, that was really mean of me. I'm sorry."
"…Oh. You were being… mean."

That's kind of deflating. I took Lutz's words so unbelievably seriously, but it seems like he was just being mean. The lingering threads of tension that coiled around me suddenly slacken.

"…I thought you really hated me, I'm so glad…"
"Nah, I don't hate you. Hey, let's keep moving!"

I take Lutz's outstretched hand, and we walk together down the street. My usual daily life feels like it's coming back around.

"Good morning," I say, as we enter the shop.

Mark looks up as we enter, then leads us to the back of the shop, where Benno is. He looks up at us, his eyes sharp as ever, rubbing his temples.

"Kid," he says, looking at Lutz, "taking care of this unreasonable girl is now your absolute maximum priority. This is your most important job, that nobody else can do. Got it? My heart can't take it, thinking about this kid could be walking around out there, then with no warning at all suddenly collapse in the middle of the street."

Lutz blinks as Benno, displeased, delivers his orders. He points at himself, doubtfully.

"…I'm the only one who can take care of her?"
"That's right. Besides you and her family, is there anyone that actually looks after this unreasonable girl? Know anyone?"
"Nope."
"How about anyone in this shop?"
"No, sir."

Lutz immediately shakes his head at each of Benno's questions. I think it might not be just my imagination that his face is practically shining and there's a hint of a proud gleam in his pale green eyes.

Nngh, I want to grab those proud cheeks and stretch them out.

"Well then, kid, I've got a few questions for you. Today, can this girl walk out to the south gate?"
"If we're watching our pace, then yeah. Since the south gate is near where we live, if she starts feeling bad we can also just go home."

This is an everyday thing, but as both Lutz and my family well know, my physical condition is downright deplorable. I've been working to gradually train myself up, but no matter how I try I just can't get my stamina to increase.

Even though, as a kid, I should be steadily growing up.

Benno looks down at me, the girl whose growth rate is terrible even though she's been training hard, then picks up the bell on top of his desk and rings it once. The door opens with a click, and Mark enters.

"You called for me, Master Benno?"
"Looks like she can walk there if she watches her speed. Lead them there, please."
"Understood, sir."
"Huh?" I ask. "Where are we going? I thought the lumberyard was near the west gate?"

I didn't think we had any business that required us to head towards the south gates. I blink, uncertainly, as Benno shrugs his shoulders.

"Mark told me about your request for a storehouse. I'll lend you one that's down by the south gates."
"Really? Thank you very much!"

As I thank him excitedly, he lets out a little sigh.

"This isn't for your sake, it's for the boy's. It'd be very difficult for him if he has to lug all of the tools everywhere while also looking after you."
"Whaaat?! I can carry things too, you know! I've gotten a little bit stronger, lately."

As I try to assert my own strength, all three of them simultaneously open their mouths in rebuttal.

"You shouldn't do anything rash, kid, just go along with it."
"I'm the one who does the lifting, so don't do anything that'll make you sick again."
"Since you won't have to carry anything, please look after your health."

I, however, refuse. I'm not just going to go along with it. I promised Tory. I'm going to do the things that I can do, and I'm going to *increase* that number. I'm going to do my own things by my own strength, and I'm going to work hard until I can do the things that I can't do right now.

With a meek expression, I nod in assent, but Lutz immediately reaches out to grab my cheeks, staring me down.

"Maine, that face… you were just pretending to listen, weren't you?"

How did that slip out?!

I look up at him, surprised, as he pinches my cheeks. Benno and Mark exchange glances, then nod.

From that day on, Lutz had a very important role in Benno's shop: "Maine Duty".

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. *Dogeza is a very Japanese way to express your deepest apologies or show the highest deference by kneeling on the floor and bowing so deeply that your head touches the ground.*

Chapter 32
Material and Tool Orders

After we leave Benno's room, Lutz and I are led out of the shop by Mark and towards a warehouse near the south gates. It seems like the south gates are where a lot of craftsmen work, so there are a lot of warehouses in this part of the town. Also, there are a lot more water wells around here than in the residential districts, since craftsmen likely use a lot of water in their work.

The warehouse that Mark leads us to has a well right next to it. It's not a particularly large space; at a glance, it looks to be about three by three and a half meters wide.[1] It looks like it was originally used for workers to store raw materials in, with rough wooden shelves nailed onto the walls. The inside has been roughly swept out, so while it's still a little dusty it doesn't seem like we'll need to do any thorough cleaning. As I look around, I notice that both a pot and a bag full of something have already been left in a corner.

"When the items you order arrive at the shop, we'll send an employee to bring them here. Yesterday, they brought the pot and the ash you ordered; they are in the corner there. Today, the large tub and the stone weight will be arriving. Please be here when they arrive."

As I look at the black pot that Mark is pointing at, my heart fills with gratitude for Benno's assistance. A pot, something that Lutz and I could absolutely never have gotten on our own, is *here*.

"Whoa, a pot!!" I exclaim. "Lutz! Can you carry this?"
"Yeah, if it's this size. I could also strap it to my back, instead."
"Well, let's measure it! We need to figure out how big the steamer's going to be."

I have a set of ordering materials, that I borrowed from Benno's shop, in my tote bag. As I rush to take out the measuring tape, Lutz casually takes it from my hands.

"…Sure, let's measure it, but let's calm down a little first. If you get too excited, you'll get sick again."
"Urgh…"

Mark smiles wryly as he watches our exchange.

“If there’s no problems with this warehouse, then I’ll be returning to the shop today. Tomorrow morning, I plan to go to the lumberyard, so please make absolutely sure you’ve finished measuring and ordering everything you’ll need by then. …Hmm, I’ll leave the shop at the third bell, so I think I should arrive at the central plaza shortly after that.”
“Yes, understood!” I say. “Thank you very much for everything so far.”

Next, he takes out a set of chains and a key, a serious expression on his face.

“I’ll leave this key with you for now. This is the key to this warehouse. When you close up here, please make very sure you don’t forget this. Then, after you’ve locked up, you need to bring this key back to the shop. Lutz, it’s alright for you to do this by yourself. All right?”
“Yes,” I reply.

After handing the heavy key to Lutz, Mark turns smoothly on his heel, then exits the warehouse.

“Lutz, shall we get started?”

This warehouse doesn’t seem to have been used very recently, so it has neither chairs nor any boxes we might sit on. This isn’t the kind of place we can really take a break.

“How about we bring in the stuff we have already? The frame we made, the bamboo, the nails…”
“Yeah, that sounds good. The things we definitely have to do today are figuring out the size of the steamer, and then the size of the wood we’re going to use, right? I want to go over what I’ve got down on these orders so far to make sure I’m not forgetting any more lumber we need… after that, we could start on making bamboo strips?”
“If we’re cutting and shaving bamboo like that, we’ll need some tools for that too.”

I write down a list of the things we need to do today on my slate, then prop it up against the wall of the warehouse. This way, I think we won’t forget anything.

Lutz and I start heading home to get our things and bring them back to the warehouse. I’m completely unfamiliar with the part of town we’re in, so I’m very lost, but Lutz seems to know exactly where we are as he casually leads us through twisting, narrow

alleyways. This warehouse is supposed to be close to the south gate and to my home, but where *are* we? As the question bounces around in my head, we turn a corner and arrive home. It's very close, much to my relief, since it'll be easy on my stamina.

"Okay," I say, "I'll go up and get everything in a basket and bring it back down here."
"Got it."

All I've got at my house is the nails. Since Lutz's family works in the construction and woodworking industries, it's very likely that if we'd left the bag of nails there, it's likely that someone in his family would have thought it was their own bag and taken them off. Similarly, if we left the frame or the bamboo we've collected at my place, they'd probably be mistaken for firewood again and burned up, so we left those at Lutz's.

I put the bag of nails and my knife into the basket. As an afterthought, I grab a dust rag and a broom, too. Since we don't have anything to use as a chair, at the very least, I want to sweep out part of the floor and lay down a cloth so that we have someplace to sit.

When I head back downstairs, Lutz is already waiting for me, with all sorts of wooden things sticking out of his basket.

"Lutz, what's that?"
"Oh, this is something Ralph messed up making the other day. I thought we could maybe use it as a chair for now."
"Heh heh, I also brought some things so we can sit down."

We head back to the warehouse, put the bag of nails on a shelf, and set the bamboo in a corner. I take out the tape measure, and the two of us measure the pot's dimensions and decide on the size of the steamer that we'll use, then write down on my slate the size of the wood that we'll be steaming.

"This look okay?"
"Yeah."

There's a lot of wood that we need to request from the lumberyard. We need the components for the steamer, the heavy stick we'll use to beat the extracted fibers, the large, flat board we'll need for the paper bed, another flat, but relatively thin board we can stick the paper to as it dries, the bamboo that we'll need to make bamboo strips, and, of course, the wood we'll be making the actual paper out of.

While I double-check to make sure I have everything written down on the order form, I start wondering about what sort of characteristics we want in our wood. Do we want a hard or a soft wood, an old or a young wood?

"Alright," says Lutz, "let's do the bamboo strips."
"Sure. Can you make them small enough?"
"Hmm, last time they were still pretty big. I wonder how we can make thinner ones?"

Under Lutz's direction, we start work on making the bamboo strips. It's relatively straightforward to make the rough cuts with single, powerful strokes, but paring them down to something more slender looks like it's a much slower, painstaking process.

"Let me try, too. If it's fine work, I think I can do it."

I take out my own knife, select a slender piece of bamboo, and try to cut it down. Halfway through, though, it suddenly snaps in two. There's not enough length left on either side for us to be able to use it without it rattling around.

"This is *really* hard," I say.
"Yeah, it really is," says Lutz.

I look at the few, rattly strips we've complete, then at the frame we have to fill, judging how much we'll need to fill it.

I really want to leave this work to people who can actually do it. The two of us have neither enough time nor skill.

As we continue to work, a call come from outside. "I've brought your goods!"

An employee from Benno's shop has arrived, carrying a large tub and a stone weight that's light enough for Lutz to lift. I have him put them in the corner, next to the pot.

"Maine," says Lutz, "our delivery came, so let's call it quits for today."

As Benno's employee leaves to head back to the shop, Lutz starts tidying up his tools. Since it's only just about noontime, though, I still think I have plenty of stamina to keep working.

“I can keep going, you know?”
“…Tomorrow looks pretty difficult, so you should get some rest today. Hey, didn’t you say you needed to do the cooking today?”
“Oh, that’s right.”

My turn to cook came around while I was stuck in bed, so Tory covered for me. So, today, it’s my turn.

“Also,” he continues, “since I’m going to the lumberyard tomorrow, I have to make sure I get all of my stuff done first.”
“Your stuff?”
“I need to make sure I get my share of tomorrow’s chores done today. So, Maine, go home. I’ll go run the key back to the shop after that.”
“Got it.”

I nod in agreement, painfully aware of how much of a burden I am, then start putting everything back in order.

The next day, shortly after the third bell rings, we meet Mark in the central plaza, then head towards the lumberyard. It seems like Benno’s shop is the busiest between when it opens just before the second bell and when the merchants start calming down at around the third bell.

Since Lutz is here with us today, I don’t collapse on the way there, and we make it to the lumberyard safely. Logs are gathered in piles here or leaned against the walls, a scene not entirely unlike something I’ve seen in Japan. However, since everything that would usually be done via machine is instead done by hand, there’s a huge number of very well-muscled buff dudes wandering around, yelling at each other as they haul wood around and cut it down to size. It’s a very lively scene. Almost excessively lively, to the point where I’m a little bit scared.

“Ahh,” says Mark, “Foreman, it’s been a while.”
“Oh! Mark, huh? That Benno kid’s doing pretty well, isn’t he?”
“Ah, yes. He’s doing quite well. For today’s business, though, these two are looking for some wood…”

The foreman sports a bristly mustache, peppered with gray, and a shiny bald head. He comes out to greet Mark, who tells him about our search.

“The little girl and the kid, huh? What the heck kinda wood do you need?”

His burly muscles don’t match his age at all. As he stares down at me, my breath catches in my throat with a squeak.

“Umm, I’m looking for wood so that I can make a steamer…”
“Huuuh? What kind of wood’s that?”

He repeats his question, a dubious expression on his face, leaving me at a total loss for words. I’m pretty sure that Lutz and Mark understand what I’ve been referring to when I talk about steamers, but I wonder if the foreman doesn’t actually know about them? Or, maybe, do I have to actually tell him the specific kinds of wood that I need?

“Ummm, I need something that keeps its shape even when there’s a lot of water vapor… ah, no, when there’s a lot of steam; a hard, dried wood. Could you please tell me what kinds of wood like that you have?”
“Hoh? A hard, dried wood, hm. I think I have an idea of what you might need.”

The foreman nods to himself, then lists off the names of three different kinds of wood.

“We’ve got zwan, turaka, and pedithry. What’ll it be?”
“What will it be, you ask… Lutz, do you know?”

Even though he’s listed off some potential candidates, I have no idea at all what any of those are. I look over my shoulder at Lutz for help.

“Hmm? Zwan’s the easiest to work with, right?”
“Well then,” says Mark, “let’s go with zwan, then. You’ve decided on the sizes you’ll need, correct?”
“Yes!” I say, pulling the order forms from my tote bag. Mark looks them over, double checking to make sure there’s no errors.
“Hmm,” he says, “there are no problems here. So, foreman, please cut zwan to the dimensions listed here, then deliver it to the shop.”
“Alright!”

He glances over the order form, then hands it to a nearby young buff dude.

“Um,” I say, “next I need a thick board and a stand to put it on, also out of a wood that won’t warp when it’s wet.”
“I can sell you the wood, but if you want it put together into a stand you’re gonna need to do it yourself or find a furniture maker. You want these in zwan, too?”
“Yes, please,” I say with a big nod, handing him the order form for the thick board. He huffs as he looks it over, then I pull out another form to hand to him.
“This sure is a lot,” he says.
“I’ve still got more,” I reply. “This is for two boards, which need to be able to get wet, and also need to be thin.”
“How thin?” he says, with a frown. “If you cut wood too thin, it’ll start bending when you put any weight on it, y'know?”

I hum tonelessly, digging through my memories. When the image of the board that we’ll be sticking the paper onto pops into my mind, I clap my hands together in inspiration, then take out my slate from its bag. The slate pencil clacks against the surface as I draw a diagram.

“Ummm, it’s going to be set in a frame and reinforced from the back like this, so something thick enough that it won’t bend when that happens. I’m worried about the weight; I know I’m not going to be able to lift, it, but if Lutz can’t…”
“I’d be a failure of a man if I couldn’t lift something that big,” interjects Lutz.

There’s no way that Lutz could even begin to compare himself to that brawny foreman. A little anxious, I turn to face him, but before I can open my mouth he’s already wearing an unpleasant frown.

“I’m a man,” he says, “so it’s all right.”

If Lutz talks too big now, he’s going to wind up paying for it later, but if I say anything now, I’ll only be wounding his masculine pride, so I let it slide.

“Next,” I say, “we’ll need a squared timber out of a hard wood, like a club, or like the rod you use when you’re beating your laundry. This also needs to be a size and weight that Lutz can carry and swing around.”
“This sounds completely different than a laundry rod, though? What are you hitting?”

Those were the two things that came to mind when I was thinking of things that you use to hit other things, but it seems that since a club is a weapon and a laundry rod is something mothers hit their washing with, the materials must be very different.

"Wood fibers," I reply. "We'll be boiling them until they're limp, then beating them until they're soft like cotton."
"What're you making, again?"
I cross my fingers in front of my mouth, making an X. "Sorry, but I can't tell you."
The foreman huffs again. "Getting the hardness and the weight balanced'll be important, huh. If we're gonna get this right, what kind of surface are you going to be doing this on? Stone? Wood? There's more variables on top of that, too, yeah?"

All of my blood rushes to my head. I had completely forgotten that we'd need some sort of chopping block built that we could beat the fibers on top of.

"…I, I didn't think about that. R, r, right, we need a block for that too! Can we order those as a set, please? I can write out the order right now!"
"Yeah, if you wanted to do it as a set you could add that to the order here, but… little girl, you're going to write it?"
"Yes, I will…?"

My head pounds with the realization of my thoughtless mistake. Trying desperately to recover somehow, I immediately take out the measuring tape, the ink, and the pen from the order-writing set, then I add to the form the dimensions of the chopping block, underneath the description of the stick itself.

"Mister," I say to the foreman, "will this do?"
"Yeah, that'll do. Is that your entire order?"
"No, next is… um, is there a kind of wood that has really long, tough fibers? If possible, we're looking for wood with sticky fibers, but if you can't then it's okay as long as they can stick together well enough and we can get a lot of them from the wood. I heard that year-old wood is the best for this; after the second year the fibers get too hard and brittle so they get really hard to work with. So, we're looking for a young, soft wood."

As I list out the characteristics of the wood that would be easiest to use in paper, the foreman's reaction isn't very good. He tugs on his mustache in thought, frowning.

“Hmmm. Wood that young isn’t very useful, so we don’t actually carry anything like that.”

It seems that this lumberyard doesn’t deal in year-old woods unless they get a special order for it.

“Um, then, if you have any idea what kinds of wood might have those traits, could you please at least give us a list of them? We don’t know exactly what kind of wood we’ll be using, so we can gather the small quantities we need ourselves to test. When we find out what we do need, though, can we order it through you?”
“I can’t say until I know how much you’re ordering. If it’s too little, it’s hard for me to make any money.”
“I understand. …Lutz, could you please find out about the names of these trees and where we can find them? I don’t think I could tell them apart, myself.”

It looks like we’re going to have to gather our raw materials ourselves after all, at least to start. Once we get our prototype finished we’ll have figured out what kind of wood we’re going to want to use, so then when we start mass production we’ll be able to place an order for it.

Lutz goes off with one of the young buff dudes to learn about the different kinds of wood and how to distinguish them. Meanwhile, I take out a bamboo strip to show the foreman and ask some questions.

“Ah, that’s right,” I say, “We need bamboo strips like this; do you have bamboo here?”
“Not that much, but yeah, we do,” he says, pointing towards one of the many piles of lumber. There, I see the familiar shapes of bamboo poles stacked up.
“Could you make these bamboo strips here?”
“Fine work like that is a craftsman’s job. Ask a craftsman.”
“A craftsman, okay. Thank you very much. Um, that’s everything in my order for today.”
“Alright,” he says, looking over the stack of order forms. “When it’s all done, you want it sent to Benno’s shop, right?”

All of the order forms I handed him are being placed in Benno’s name. Since we have a contract saying that he’ll provide the initial *material* investment in exchange for my simple shampoo, it seems that Benno’s the one doing all of the actual ordering. It seems that the formality of having Benno purchase and receive the goods, then have them delivered to us is important to the way the contract magic works.

“Yes, please. Thank you very much for your assistance.”

The foreman heads back off to his duties. As I wait for Lutz to come back, I stick my hand into my tote bag and feel around, making sure I didn’t accidentally forget to turn a form in. All I have left are the order for the stand, which I need to find a furniture maker for, and the order for the bamboo strips, which I need to find a craftsman for.

Hmmm, what should we do about the stand for the paper bed? To be honest, a stand like that doesn’t seem like the kind of thing I need to expressly go to a furniture maker in order to get.

“…Mister Mark,” I say, “Do you have any wooden boxes at the shop that we could use for a table? I think it would be wasteful to ask a furniture maker to make a custom one.”
“Ah, I understand. I’ll make to find some for you. How many do you need?”
“We’re going to need two that are the same size so that we can put a board on top of them. I’d be really happy if we could get two or three more, but the size of those doesn’t really matter.”

Mark readily agrees, since this will be far cheaper than ordering something custom from a furniture maker. When Lutz comes back, Mark says that it’s time to split up for the day.

“Perhaps we should go to the craftsman’s workshop another day. I’d be unable to get in contact with one today, so shall we part ways here?”
“Alright,” I say. “Thank you very much.”

The next day, we head to the forest to gather firewood. While we’re at it, I try to figure out if there was any trees out here that might work for making paper, but since Lutz is ultimately far more knowledgable about this than I am, I basically just foist the entire task off onto him. I mean, every single tree I see looks just like every other tree to me! Sure, there’s differences in the color and texture of their bark, but there’s so many different variations, I can’t actually remember any at all.

Then, when we stop by the shop to borrow the warehouse key so that we can store what we've found, Mark informs us that he was able to get in contact with a craftsman who could help us.

Mister Mark, you're amazing at your job. Such a quick worker.

Thanks to Mark, five days after our visit to the lumberyard, we're able to meet with a craftsman. As usual, we meet in the central plaza around the third bell, then head towards our destination. It seems that since this craftsman's workshop gets a lot of traffic from other workers, it's located near the south gates.

Unlike the foreman at the lumberyard, this craftsman is, if I had to describe him, a rather slender man. He has the muscles he needs to do his job, but the rest of his physique is the embodiment of minimizing unnecessary things. His ashen hair reaches down to his back, loosely tied into a ponytail so that it doesn't get in the way of his work.

"What's the job?"

He scans me up and down with his sharp eyes, the picture of the neurotic artisan. I reflexively cling to Mark's pant leg.

"I'd like thin bamboo strips like this," I say, pulling one of the ones we've already made out of my tote bag and handing it to him. "I asked at the lumberyard if they could make it, but the foreman said I should go see a craftsman…"

He turns the imprecisely cut strip over in his hands, his mouth pursed.

"Do you need it to be wavy like this?"
"I tried to make it as straight as possible…"
"Hm, if I account for your lack of skill, it's clear what you're looking for. Got it. Those are the ingredients?"

The craftsman points at the bamboo that Lutz has in a basket on his back, which we retrieved from the warehouse on our way here. We take it out of the basket and stack it up for him.

"That all you need?"
"Um! I'm hoping that you could make a *'bamboo mat'*, do you think you can?"

I draw a diagram on my slate, then use the one bamboo strip I have as a prop as I try to explain what I'm looking for. Despite my crude explanation, it seems that the craftsman somehow manages to capture the image of what I'm looking for.

"That's going to be a real pain to make, but I can't say I can't make it."
"Really? Amazing!"
"*But*, I can't make that work if I don't have a strong enough thread. Go get me some of that before you place the order."

He flicks his hands at us as he talks, shooing us away. However, there's no way I can let myself be driven out like this. After all, I have literally zero idea as to what kind of thread is going to be tough enough to work.

"Umm, I'm sorry, but I don't really know what thread is strong enough for you. Would you be able to help me look, please?"
"I'm free to head to the thread wholesaler right now, so I can, sure."
"Let's go!"

I lift my fist enthusiastically to the sky. I'm quite happy that this disagreeable-looking craftsman suddenly said something so cooperative.

"Oi, Maine," scolds Lutz from behind me, grabbing me by the top of the head. Pouting, I spin around to face him. He glares at me, his green eyes narrowed in irritation.

"Don't be so rash. You're the first one who's gonna pay for that, you know."
"It seems that today she would like to be carried in my arms today as well, doesn't it?" says Mark.
"Eek?!" I say.

I don't know if he clearly remembers how much I hated having been carried all the way home last time; his pleasant smile shows no indication either way as he approaches me. As I cautiously back up, the craftsman, sounding irritated, speaks up.

"Are we going or not? Pick one!"
"We're going, of course," says Mark. "Maine said so after all. Right?"

Mark captures me, lifts me up in his arms, and hauls me off to the thread wholesaler. Since we don't have to worry about watching my walking pace, there's a big difference

in our speed. I'm quietly surprised that, even though I'm being held in his arms, it's a remarkably smooth ride. I let out a dissatisfied sigh, my face near his shoulder.

I'd planned to keep forging on, but I just wound up being a bother again…

Since the thread wholesaler is along the workers' streets, it's not actually very far away. Even still, as someone who's mentally an adult, being carried in someone's arms like this makes me want to flee far, far away. When we arrive at the wholesaler, he *finally* lets me down, letting me walk on my own two feet while in the store.

"Whoa, there's so much thread here!"
"Yep," mutters the craftsman, "because it's a wholesaler. For thread."

Despite his quip, I'm still amazed by the spectacle of the huge quantity of thread that's gathered here. In this city, the stalls in the town market don't carry anything more than what they can reasonably sell to individual customers, and the shops on the first floor of buildings along the main streets have limited amounts of merchandise on display, just enough for samples, to minimize the damage that a robber or a burglar might cause. It's very rare to see so much of a commodity crammed into a space like this.

"Which of these are the tough ones?" I ask.

In Japan, the thread we use to when making bamboo *keta* mats is spun from raw silk. Here, I don't know if silkworms, let alone silk, actually exist, so I don't know how to pick a strong enough string.

"Silk from a spinne would be the strongest, especially any harvested during their breeding season in the fall. However, it's expensive, yeah?"

I glance at Mark questioningly, and he returns my glance. I'm not the one actually in charge of the money. Mark is, as he's been entrusted with the final say over the contents of Benno's purse.

"Spinne silk would be fine, but it shouldn't be necessary to be particular about it being from the fall, is it?"
"…Yeah, you're right, but is spinne silk really okay?"
"Yes, it would be."

It seems like spinne silk is a very highly-priced item. The craftsman slowly, gingerly takes down a spool from a shelf full of the most expensive, highest quality goods. Startled, I exchange another glance with Mark.

“However,” he says, “if there are complaints about the final product, I will not forgive your mistakes. I trust that you’ll finish this task to perfection.”

Mark briefly looks over the order form that I’ve retrieved from my tote bag, then hands it and my sample bamboo stick to the craftsman with a broad smile.

“I leave this in your capable hands.”
“…Yeah.”

Two postcard-sized mats to fit the paper frames. With that, all of the orders for our tools have been successfully placed, without any trouble at all. I breathe a sigh of relief.

After that, I wind up playing house-sitter at the warehouse for a while, watching as the goods we ordered start to arrive. As that happens, Lutz and I work to build our tools using the parts that have reached us already.

All the while, we routinely head into the forest to do our gathering, and although we make sure to help around the house enough that we won’t get scolded by our families, we steadily gather our raw materials.

We don’t yet know if we’re going to use edil fruit or the bodily fluids from a slamo bug as a substitute for sunset hibiscus sap, so we start by trying edil fruits. It seems that in the autumn, when winter preparations begin, the sticky juice from an edil fruit is commonly spread along window frames, which are then stuffed with cloth to seal the windows off from drafts. As such, in just a little while, the number of fruits available at the town market is going to start decreasing, and the price is probably going to start going up, too. So, since it seems like we won’t be able to use edil fruit, we’re going to need to use slamo bug juice.

Also, when it came time to go shopping for edil fruit, I was once again laid out with a fever, so Lutz went to meet Mark by himself. I heard from Lutz that he was finally able to get some valuable experience from working with Mark, so I briefly wondered if I’ve been butting in a little too much.

By the time all of our raw ingredients have been collected, my health has recovered, and we are finally able to start working on making the paper itself, a month and a half has passed since our very first meeting with Benno.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. The original measurement is given as "6 tatami mats". Tatami mats are a kind of woven floor, built to standardized panel sizes, and rooms are generally sized by the number of panels you could fit into the room. A standard layout for a 6-tatami room is about 2.75 x 3.65 meters; I've rounded to the nearest half-meter to preserve the roughness of the measurement.

Chapter 33
Starting Paper Making

Today, we can *finally* start making paper. I'm raring to go, excited to the point where Lutz might tell me that I need to back it off a bit.

Today's tasks include finding and cutting down wood from trees that we think might work, based on what we were told at the lumberyard and what Lutz learned after asking various people he knew. Then, I'm thinking that we'll set up next to the river and steam the wood, then submerge it in the river and strip the rough outer bark from it. We can then leave that bark in the warehouse to let it dry out.

Since our prototype is only going to need to be postcard-sized, I don't think we need very much raw wood to use as materials. However, since we'll need to steam it for several hours, we'll need to gather a lot of wood to use as fuel. If we're working in the forest, gathering that much firewood shouldn't be particularly difficult, and if we start to run out we can always go and find more. Lutz, though, seems to be having a hard time lugging both the pot and the steamer.

In order to do this, he had to go out early in the morning to get the key to the warehouse, then go back to retrieve the pot and the steamer. Since we'll have more work to do in the warehouse afterwords, he also let Mark know that we'd be keeping the key for the day. All of this preliminary work went flawlessly, but right now, things are unexpectedly difficult.

"Lutz, are you okay?" I ask.
"…Yeah," he says.

Although he says, that, he does not look at all okay as he trudges forward, the pot and steamer tied securely to his back. It looks like he's about to give out any second now.

The cause is simple. When we looked at the pot, he judged that it was a weight he'd have no problem carrying, and he did the same when we finished the steamer. "Yeah, I can carry this much," he said. However, he didn't actually think about what it would be like to carry both of them simultaneously all the way to the forest.

"Can I carry the steamer, maybe?"

“No, it’s too much for you.”
“…Okay.”

If Lutz says it’s too much for me, then it’s probably too much for me. All I can do right now is cheer Lutz on while I make sure to get to the forest without overdoing it.

As always, a number of other children are walking with us as we all head to the forest together.

“Lutz, whatcha got there?”
“What’re you doing in the forest today?”

Since Lutz is carrying both a pot and a never-before-seen steamer, the other children are very curious.

“A pot and a steamer,” he says, tersely. “Making paper.”

The stuff he’s carrying must be very heavy for him to be so taciturn. The children, though, are so full of curiosity that the pay no attention to his mood and keep peppering him with questions.

“Huh? What are you making?”
“Is it something fun?”
“…No,” he replies. “I have to do this if I want to get my apprenticeship, they’re seeing if I can do it or not.”
“Oh, okay! Got it. Good luck, Lutz!”

I thought the questions were going to be endless, but as soon as they heard that it was something Lutz needed to do to secure his apprenticeship, they immediately started drifting away.

I have no idea why the kids left us alone so quickly, so I ask Lutz about it. He says that even though a lot of kids get their apprenticeships through their parents, a lot of the more popular professions can get a flood of applications. In those cases, some parents will change tack, but it looks like there’s also some apprenticeships that have selection tests.

It seems that other children are absolutely forbidden from interfering in these tests. There's probably cases where some kids mess with others out of revenge, but if word of that were to get out then it would make their own job search even harder.

Oh ho, I see. Trying to get into a popular job is the same, no matter where you go.

When we pass by the gate, Otto waves at us encouragingly. "Good luck!" he says. He probably noticed the pot and steamer on Lutz's back and figured out that we're getting started making paper.

"Yeah, we'll do our best! Oh, Daddy! We're heading out," I say, waving at him.

My father has been sulking a bit lately since I've been spending so much time with Lutz lately, but he still waves back at us, wearing a complicated expression that flickers somewhere between smiling and sullen. He's not happy that I'm on such good terms with both Otto and Lutz, but I know very well that, with his particular mentality, there's no way he wouldn't be happy when his daughter waves cheerfully at him.

"Whooof. I'm tired~. That was way heavier than I thought."

Lutz rolls his shoulders, having set the pot and steamer on the ground near the riverbank.

"Good work, Lutz. Want to take a break for a little?"
"Nah, steaming's going to take about a bell's time once we start, right? I'll rest then."

Even as he's saying that, he's already starting to pile up rocks in a circle, building a makeshift stove that we can set the pot on top of.

That's Lutz for you. Nothing's too impossible for him.

Compared to Lutz, who's so used to outdoor work, my previous life was all about indoor work, so I don't have very much experience with this at all. Not being very useful, though, is basically my natural state. All I can do right now is gather up wood from the nearby area and hand it over to Lutz. He fills the pot up with water from the river, sets it on top of the stove, then quickly piles up wood underneath it and gets a fire going.

“I’ll head off and start cutting down some wood, so how about you take a break and watch the fire for a while?”
“Aren’t you the one that needs a break?!”
“Well, if your health gets worse before we can make paper, I’ll really be in trouble. You’ll probably be fine gathering more wood around here, but don’t move around too much. Also, if anything happens, give a shout. Got it?”
“…Alright.”

Like Lutz asked, I quietly stay near the fire, keeping watch over it. Although, it looks like it’s going to be quite a long time before it actually starts boiling, so I’ve got some spare time. I gather up more fallen wood from around the area, bring it back to the firepit, and feed it into the fire.

When I’ve collected all the wood from the immediate area, I head a little bit further into the forest looking for more. As I reach down to pick up a stick, I see something half-buried in the dirt. It looks like a large red berry, kind of like a pomegranate.

“Huh? What’s that?” I wonder aloud. “Is it edible? Or maybe can I press oil out of it?”

I’m convinced that most of the things in the forest are used in day-to-day life around here. After all, I’ve been living in this world for nearly a year now, so it’s only natural that I’d start thinking like it. When I was in Japan, I wouldn’t have done anything like arbitrarily gathering up whatever I see on the ground.

“I’ll have to ask Lutz about this,” I muse.

I grab a sturdy stick and start digging around the red berry, until I have it free of the ground. I reach down to pick it up, only to find it rapidly heating up in my hands.

Oh no! This is probably some incomprehensibly weird fruit.

Somehow, it seems like this red berry is another one of those really strange ingredients that I sometimes wind up using in my cooking. To be honest, I have literally no idea what’s about to happen, much less how to deal with it. Frantically, I summon all of my power, and throw it as far away from me as I possibly can… which means it lands about five meters away.

Bang! Ba-ba-bang! The red berry bursts open violently, scattering everywhere. Suddenly, countless plants start sprouting from the ground. As I stare, dumbfounded, they quickly grow until they're up to my ankles.

What?! What the hell?! What are these pop-up trees?![1]

I frantically run away from this clearly abnormal situation, yelling at the top of my lungs.

"Lutz! Lutz! Luuutz! Something weird's happeniiiiiing!"
"What's wrong, Maine?!"

Lutz comes crashing through the trees, probably from somewhere nearby. As soon as he sees what I'm pointing at, all the color drains from his face. He sticks his fingers in his mouth and lets out a piercing whistle.

"Tronbay!" he yells.
"What's tro—" I start to ask, but he cuts me off.
"I'll explain later!"

He immediately unsheathes his machete, chopping away at the rapidly-growing plants. By now, they're up to his knees (and up to my thighs). It's very clear that these fast-growing plants are actually extremely dangerous.

"Head to the river, Maine! Got it?!"
"G… got it!"

There's no spare time to chat in the middle of an emergency. I flee back towards the riverbank. The other children come running in from the other direction, summoned by Lutz's whistle.

"What's u— whoa, tronbay?!"
"It's tronbay!"
"Cut it down, now!"

As always, I'm the only one who doesn't know what's going on. It looks like all the kids who came running already know what these pop-up trees are. Like Lutz, they all take out their knives and machetes as they head towards the plants.

As the children run around, cutting down the pop-up trees, I sit by the pot and watch the reaping unfold. *The foe is a plant,* I think to myself, *so couldn't I just burn it down since I've got fire here?* However, I'm already winded from that little bit of running I did, so I can't really do anything but sit by the river like Lutz told me.

"Any more still growing?" I hear.

While I sat, worn-out, by the riverbank, the reaping of the pop-up trees seems to have drawn to a close. The children search about, making sure that there aren't any that they've missed.

"I think we're alright now."
"There may be more tronbay around, so be pay attention out there when you're working. If anything happens give a whistle."

The children disperse, going back to their gathering. Lutz comes over to stand next to me.

"I told you to go sit by the river… was that too much?"
"…Yeah, too much."

Lutz just finished chopping down a large number of plants, but I'm still the one who's shamelessly gasping for every breath. If someone were to stumble across us like this, they definitely wouldn't be able to guess who was on the front lines of that battle.

"Lutz, what was, that?"
"That was tronbay."

Tronbay, he says, are extremely fast-growing trees that, if you let them grow to adulthood, immediately suck up all the nutrients from the surrounding soil. Also, if you let them get too big, they become extremely difficult to cut down, to the point where you need to request the order of knights to send someone to deal with them.

Huh, so there's an order of knights here? As I'd expect of a fantasy world.

"It's weird, though."
"What is?"

Lutz sits down on a rock on the riverbank, catching his breath, his head tilted to one side in puzzlement.

"It's kinda early for tronbay to show up. It's usually much closer to autumn before you start seeing them."
"Huh…"
"They also were growing *really* quickly. But the soil around them wasn't really churned up…"
"Hmm!"
"What, you don't think that's weird?"

Lutz stares at me, unimpressed by my lack of reaction. Asking me directly like that, though, puts me in a tight spot. This is the first time I've seen something like this, so I can't tell if it's weird or not. Trees popping up out of the ground like that is weird enough to me already.

"Umm, I've never seen tronbay before, so I can't tell if that was any different than usual."
"Ah, that's right. You've only been coming to the forest since the spring."

He nods several times in understanding. As he does so, the pot starts audibly bubbling as the water comes to a boil.

"Lutz, where's the wood?"
"It's scattered somewhere around there, I think…"

He points over to where the tronbay was growing, hanging his head. It looks like he'd found enough wood well before the pot came to a boil, but he threw away all his hard work when the tronbay suddenly appeared.

"…Hey, Lutz. We've come all this way, so how about we try making paper out of tronbay? There's a lot of it, and since it was cut down right after it started growing, its fibers are probably still very soft…"
"Hey, you're right. Going back to get the other stuff right now would be a huge pain."

We put the tronbay in the steamer, then Lutz sets it on top of the pot. All we need to do for a little while is just keep feeding the fire so it doesn't go out. Lutz keeps an eye on the condition of the fire for a while, occasionally throwing in a few pieces of the firewood that I'd gathered earlier.

“Maine, sorry, but could you watch the fire for a bit? I’m going to go gather up the wood I dropped.”
“Okay,” I reply.

He heads back out to where he’d been startled by the tronbay to go pick up the wood, perhaps because he’s had a bit of time to rest. I, in my new position as fire watchman, grab tightly to a stick, staring intently at the fire. By now, I’m actually able to regulate fires a little bit, but I’ve made too many inattentive mistakes getting to this point that I can’t take my eyes off of it now.

Gas stoves really are convenient. At this point, induction grills and microwave ovens are practically magic. Seriously.

As the tronbay steams, Lutz heads off to work on his gathering duties. It seems like there’s quite a lot of things to eat in the forest around the time summer turns to autumn. I gather some things as well, alternating between keeping an eye on the fire and picking up whatever catches my eye.

“I found a lot of stuff, Lutz! What do you think?”
“Lemme see, lemme see… …Maine! Pay *attention*! Actually look to see if you can bring something home *before* you pick it up.”

As he looks over the pile of things I’d collected, the color drains from his face. He goes through the pile, pulling out everything that couldn’t be eaten. Over thirty percent of what I’d found was poison.

“This one’s bad. If you eat it, your arms and legs will go all numb, and you won’t be able to move for three whole days. This is bad too. If you eat it, you’ll foam at the mouth and die. This too! It’ll make your stomach hurt terribly for two days. …Maine, if you don’t learn this stuff soon, you won’t have to worry about dying from sickness, because you’ll poison yourself to death! Got it?”

Yep. And it’s not just me who’ll die if I don’t remember this, it’ll be my family, too.

I need to immediately start memorizing not just the things that are useful in everyday life, but also how to distinguish which things out here are poisonous. I don’t have anything like an illustrated field guide, either, so I have no way to do this other than have it shown to me in person.

“I’ll try hard to remember, so please teach me about it,” I say.
“Yeah.”

Faintly, the sound of the city’s bell rings through the air, and we take the steamer off the pot. A burst of steam hits us in the face as we open it up, but just from taking a look at it I actually can’t tell if it’s had enough time to steam.

“Is this okay?” asks Lutz.
“I don’t really know, but let’s put it in the river and peel off the bark.”

We dunk the wood in the river, then try to strip off the bark while the wood is still warm. It comes off cleanly, without crumbling or snapping at all. This is far easier than I thought it was going to be. We might have found an excellent material after all.

“This tronbay might be really good for making paper,” I say.
“We don’t know when it’ll grow, though, and we have to cut it down when it’s really young, right?”
“…Whoa, this isn’t going to work, then.”

I sigh, thinking back on how things unfolded today. If we could cultivate this, it would be an amazing material, but, alas.

“Hey, Maine. Is this all we need to do today?”
“Yeah. Next we need to let the bark dry out completely.”
“…Hmmm. Alright, I’ll go wash up the pot, so take care of these, okay?”

Lutz leaves me with tidying up the pile of bark as he goes to clean up the pot and the steamer. Sitting there and lining all of the strips in a row is remarkably fun, so I’m in good spirits as I pick away at the pile.

As we return home, I carry several strips of the bark we harvested in the basket on my back. Lutz carries the pot and steamer, putting his entire soul into lugging it along. Since he’s also carrying the things we gathered today, his burden is definitely way heavier than it was when we had first gone out.

Both Lutz and I are barely still on our feet as we make it back to town and split off from the rest of the group to head to the warehouse. When we get there, Lutz unlocks the door, steps inside, and drops everything to the ground.

"Aaargh, that was heavy!"
"You had a lot more stuff coming back than you did before, after all. You know, I could probably have carried a little more…"

What I'd carried back already took all of my effort. I didn't really have any extra surplus of energy to help him out. Lutz sits down in the corner and takes out a fistful of bark strips from the pot.

"Hey, Maine," he says, waving them around, "how and where are we going to dry these things?"
"Eh? Ummm… how, huh?"

I'd been thinking that we'd dry it out kinda like you dry out hay, but we don't have any poles to do that from. I look around the room, searching for something to use.

"Lutz," I say, putting a hand on his shoulder, "I know your tired, but could you hammer a bunch of nails at even distances into these shelves, please? I'll dry the bark on that."
"…If I have to…"

Lutz hammers nails into the board, his hammer ringing, and I hang strips of bark from them. This is doable for now, since we don't have very many of them, but when we move on to mass production, we'll need a dedicated place for drying.

When we get to the point where we start mass production, I'll ask Benno about it. We don't need to worry about that right now, right?

"It would be pretty bad if these couldn't dry completely here. If they're damp for too long they'll start getting moldy. Tomorrow, when we go to the forest, maybe we should take these along and dry them in the sun?"
"So, could we just bring the bark with us tomorrow and keep the work pretty light? I want to gather some normal things. There's a lot of things I need to get for my family, so I'd really appreciate it."
"Yeah, I want to gather a lot of mushrooms too so that I can try drying them out. I want to try making soup stock out of them."
"…Maine, get better at picking out the poison ones first."

The next day, we bring the bark with us. I hang the strips off the rim of my basket, then collect quite a large number of mushrooms.

About twenty percent of them were poisonous.

That's weird, I didn't expect that…

Over the next few days, we let the bark dry out in the sun until it was completely dry. I don't actually know how to tell when it's "completely dry", so I let it dry until I started wondering if I was maybe overdoing it. With the hard, dry bark strips in hand, we head back out to the forest. Our next step now is to let them soak in the river for a full day, so the weather is actually important.

We pick a spot in the river that wouldn't really stand out to anyone looking for it, then arrange some rocks in a circle and place the bark inside.

"Will this work?" asks Lutz.
"…Probably. Let's check on it on our way back home."

I don't have much practical experience, so I'm not very confident, but I'm pretty sure this is probably going to work. While I think about it, I look down at my feet, immersed in the river water.

…It should be obvious, but I don't have any rubber boots or gloves.

Today, the weather is still fairly warm, so the water is merely cool, but as the seasons progress, the river might start getting life-threateningly cold.

"Lutz, before it gets too cold, we need to get all of the wood to this point, not just the tronbay. At some point we won't be able to go in the river anymore."
"…You're right. The river's pretty cold already, too."

Perhaps he'd been thinking about what was going to happen when the weather got cold too, because he frowns, nodding in agreement to my suggestion.

“Today let’s cut down some wood, and hide it somewhere like we did with the clay. Tomorrow if we bring the pot and the steamer, shouldn’t we have some wood ready to go?”
“Yeah, you’re right.”

We spend some time searching for suitable wood, collecting a variety of different kinds and stashing them underneath a bush. While we do our gathering, I occasionally stop by the river to check on the state of the bark. They’ve been drifting around within the enclosure of the rocks, but they don’t look like they’re in any danger of being washed away. They’ve also started to swell up a bit from being immersed in the water.

“I’ll be kinda worried while we’re away from the forest, but I think it’ll be okay,” says Lutz.
“…Yeah.”

With great reluctance, I head home, but even then I can’t help but worry about what’s happening to the bark. What if it suddenly starts raining super hard upstream, causing the water to surge and wash everything away? What if bandits come, see that there’s floating treasure, and steal it? Increasingly strange thoughts bounce unceasingly around my head as I stare blankly at the wall.

The next day, I’m fidgeting constantly as we walk back towards the forest, but when we arrive I see that neither has a flash flood washed everything away nor have bandits stolen it, so they’re right there where we left them.

“Oh, phew, they didn’t disappear.”
“…So,” says Lutz, “now what do we do?”

Lutz picks up a soggy, floppy strip of bark and looks at it dubiously.

“We’ll use our knives to strip off this outer part, leaving only the white inner part of it. Although, let’s start steaming the wood we got yesterday first. We can work on this while the wood’s steaming.”
“Got it.”

The stone stove we made last time is still there, so after we do a little bit of maintenance we set the pot and the steamer back on it again. With that complete, we find a large, flat rock near the riverbank, close enough that we can keep the an eye on the pot, and start working on peeling off the outer bark.

“Looks like we can leave the bark we want to dry here for now. Let’s try to get all of the white bark finished while the weather’s still warm out.”
“Right!”

Skrnk, skrnk, skrnk…… Screeeeeeeeeeeek……

We place the bark on top of the stone, then start stripping the dark outer bark away so that we can keep only the lighter inner bark. It’s kind of like slicing off the high-quality breast meat from a chicken. The bark isn’t quite as tough as that, though, so we have to use short, halting strokes. There’s probably better tools and better methods for doing this, but right now, I need to make the best of what I’ve got.

Skrnk, skrnk, skrnk…… Screeeeeeeeeeeek……

“Hey, Maine. This, um… well, it’s not like I *can’t* do it, but…”
“Yeah, we need a table for this.”

The sound of our knives scraping against the stone shoots through my body, leaving me with unceasing goosebumps. I very, very much want some sort of cutting board to do this kind of work on.

Thinking back on the list of tools that I’d written down, I really did wind up missing a lot of necessary things. I thought I’d had a good grasp on it, but there’s a lot of things I didn’t know about at all. As we work, it looks like we’re going to need to gradually supplement our supplies with more things that we need.

With tears in my eyes, I continue peeling away at the bark, my goosebumps serving as a keen reminder of how important experience actually is.

Translator’s notes:

1. There’s a pun here that doesn’t have a particularly good translation. Urano describes the plants as “にょきによっ木” (nyoki-nyokki). “にょきによき” (nyoki-nyoki) is an onomatopoetic expression that describes tall, thin things popping up everywhere, one by one, and “木” (ki) means tree. She’s swapping the last syllable of the first expression with the word for tree to describe trees that pop up everywhere.

Chapter 34
A Regretful Mistake

Today, we brought with us our pot and some ash. As the dark outer bark of the other wood we're experimenting with dries in the sun, we'll boil the light inner bark from the tronbay together with the ash for about a bell's worth of time. Lutz is much lighter on his feet today, perhaps because just the pot and the amount of ash we'll be needing today aren't all that heavy for him.

After we walk to the riverbank, I set down the basket I was carrying on my back, then hang strips of bark from its edges to dry. While I do so, Lutz starts preparing the pot. He fills it with water, sets it on top of our stone stove, then starts heading off to find firewood.

"Listen up, Maine. Do not, under any circumstance, leave this pot."
"I *get it* already!"

The pot and the ashes are both very important and very difficult to acquire, so they're worth quite a lot of money. On top of that, we'll be in big trouble if the bark we've processed so far gets stolen as well. So, even someone as useless as me can come in handy once in a while, watching the stuff.

I've been putting more effort into gathering lately, wandering around more and more, so Lutz has been incessantly hammering in his point.

"You *say* that you get it, but every time you see something interesting, you immediately stagger off to look at it!"
"I'll stay right here until you get back, so just go already!"

When I first started coming to the forest, I used to set down my basket as soon as I arrived, because it was so heavy. Whenever I tried leaving it behind as I went deeper into the forest, though, Lutz and Tory would get amazingly angry at me. Unlike in Japan, it seems like in this world you'd never, ever wander off and leave any of your things unattended. For this reason, all the kids who go to the forest always have their baskets and boxes worn on their backs, and they don't ever gather more than they can carry.

Lutz very quickly comes back with wood, which he uses to build a fire, then immediately takes off to get more for later. I periodically adjust the position of the basket as the daylight shifts, moving it out of the shadows in order to maximize the amount of drying time the outer bark gets, all while still keeping an eye on the pot.

"Is it boiling yet?"
"Yeah, just about, I think."

To the bubbling pot, I add the strips of inner bark and the ash, then realize that I need something to stir the pot with. However, we don't have anything like that prepared.

Nooo… yet another thing I didn't think we'd need.

I slump down dejectedly, suddenly aware of just how lacking my imagination is, then start looking around for something we might be able to use.

"Lutz, could you please make me a couple of long straight sticks, about the same length, that I could use to stir the pot? I think wood would peel apart and get mixed in, so it would be great if you could use bamboo. There's probably some nearby, right?"
"Sticks made out of bamboo? Got it."

Lutz skillfully cuts a length of bamboo and whittles it into two long cooking chopsticks for me. Using those, I start stirring the pot. As I marvel at how much better he's gotten at carving bamboo, maybe from when he made all those bamboo strips, Lutz murmurs something to himself.

"…You're really great at stirring things with those, huh."
"Um?! Y-y-yes! They're super handy, aren't they?"

I force a smile onto my face, covering my sudden panic, as a cold sweat runs down my spine. This world doesn't have Asian cooking, so of course it doesn't have any chopsticks, so of *course* it wouldn't have any people in it who are able to use chopsticks. There probably doesn't exist a single normal little girl on this planet who would look at a pot that needs to be stirred, ask someone to make some chopsticks for her, wield them both in one hand correctly, then stir away like it's the most normal thing in the world.

Whoa, Lutz has a kind of doubtful expression on his face. It must be just my imagination. Just my imagination. Just my imagination, right?

I continue stirring the pot, internally second-guessing every single movement. It would be very suspicious of me to suddenly change my grip and grab them like normal sticks right after he pointed it out. I have to keep using them like this for now, but my heart is pounding in my ears.

Aaaaaahhh, I'm such an idiot! This totally isn't just me thinking I'm looking suspicious!

I try to keep my face as normal as I can as I continue stirring the boiling bark. After a while, I hear the faint chiming of the town bell, signaling that it's probably about time to move on.

We put the stewed bark in the river, simultaneously washing out the ash and exposing it to the sunlight. The more it's exposed to the sun, the lighter it should be bleached. I don't know exactly how the plants of this world behave, though, so I'm having to make assumptions based on what I remember from Earth.

"Now we leave it like this for another day," I say.
"Right. Got it," says Lutz.

To make sure our paper will be as white as we can get it, we'll leave the bark in the river for another full day. After Lutz finishes washing up the pot, we take turns going out to do our gathering work.

I manage to reduce the total percentage of poisonous mushrooms by a just a little bit. I'll need to keep at it like this.

The next day, our main paper-related task is just retrieving the bleached white bark from the river. Essentially, we're just going about our gathering business as usual, then when we're just about ready to head back we'll stop by the river and collect the bark. To do that, instead of bringing the pot with us today we've borrowed a bucket from home, but that's all we need for today.

"Work's going to be mostly at the warehouse starting tomorrow, after all," I say.
"Ah, okay. So, we have to make sure we get all of our gathering done today, then."

I wind up with a sizable amount of things, including edible mushrooms that Lutz helped me select, several nearly-ripe melia fruit that Lutz helped me pick, and some

cran that I hope to boil down into jam. While we work, I sample a few things for myself. These fruit are far, far more sour than anything I used to eat in Japan, but since this world lacks sweet things so dearly, you could think of these as delicious.

The next day, instead of going to the forest, we sit outside the well in front of our warehouse to work. Today, I hope to get through picking all the junk out of the fibers and combing them out, enough to make several sheets of paper.

Picking the junk out of the fibers involves finding and removing any damaged or knotted sections of the wood, which will increase the quality and consistency of the finished paper. Since this is work that can be done sitting down, I'm in charge of that. While I pick through it, Lutz is peeling edil fruit, crushing it, and mixing the pulp with water to make a sticky binding agent.

"Hey, Maine. This the kinda goop you were looking for?"
"…Hmmm, I think so? Since it's sticky, I think that's good, but honestly I don't know exactly what we need. Try thinking about what it's going to be like when we're mixing the fibers in with it."

After I'm done removing all of the junk from the fibers, we start pounding them out. Using a squared timber made of a hard, oak-like wood, we need smash away at the pile of bark until it's as soft as cotton. In order to make the stick comfortable to hold, we whittle the corners off of one side of it, then wrap some cloth that we borrowed from home around that side. Then, Lutz starts pounding away at it. This is Lutz's job. If I were to try it, given how little strength I have, all I'd do is get in the way.

This time, since we're just working on a prototype, we don't really need very many fibers so this doesn't take a tremendous amount of time, but when we're looking to start increasing the quantity, it looks like this might be really tough.

We put the beaten, softened fibers in the tub, add the binder, then add water a little bit at a time so that we can regulate the stickiness of the mixture. Ordinarily, the next step would involve using a kind of large comb called a *mase* to churn this all together. For now, though, since we're working with such small quantities, I have Lutz make two more sets of cooking chopsticks, then I hold them together like I was about to use them to whip up a custard, and mix the fibers up that way.

…If I remember right, when I made recycled paper out of an old milk carton that one time, the mixture felt kind of like this…

Since I am nothing even remotely like a craftsman, I don't have any real sense for regulating the mixture, so I try my best to recreate how I remember the paper slurry I worked with back then felt. Finally, I take that slurry and spread it onto the bamboo mat in the paper frame.

"Aaah, finally, the part I actually know how to do!"

When we made homemade paper in my home economics class, the process was simple: we took recycled milk cartons, boiled them, peeled off the shiny polyethylene coating, put them into an electric mixer, added laundry starch, spread it out over a screen, and let it dry. We're at the stage now in making *washi* that my home economics experience actually applies to: spreading pulp out to dry.

My time has finally come! Roar out, my practical experience!

"You really know how to do this?" asks Lutz, looking at me with a very doubtful expression on his face as I quickly set up the paper frame.

Well, certainly, there have been a lot of parts in this process that have been really vague, and there have been a lot of tools that I didn't know we needed until we actually needed them, but all of those problems were because I lacked any actual practical experience.

Although I'm a little bitter about how little confidence Lutz has in me, I still stand up straight, suck in my baby gut, and look him dead on.

"Leave it to me!" I say, cheerfully. "I've done this part before."
"…When?" he says, frowning. "Where?"

The sudden sharpness in his voice makes my heart freeze.

"Guh?! …A, a, aaaaa, a maiden has her secrets!! Don't pry!!"

Aaaaaaaaaaagh! I'm an idiot! I'm such an idiot! What am I *saying*?! He's staring now! He's staring at me! Aaaaaagh! Did I just wreck everything for myself?!

I try desperately to hide the screams of terror in my heart behind a pleasant smile as I transfer some of the pulp into the paper frame. My fingers tremble slightly as I work, but not so much that it can be seen. I scoop some pulp into the frame, then shake it around, letting it spread out over the surface of the mat.

"Why're you moving it like that?"
"Oh, this? By shaking it around, you can make sure it spreads out evenly so the paper will be the same thickness for the whole sheet. After this, depending on the kind of paper and how thick we want it, we might repeat this step a few more times."
"Hmmm, you've done this before, so you know a lot about it, huh?"

Lutz's frigid stare drills into me, scrutinizing every tiny detail of my facial expression. No matter what I say, I don't think I'll be able to weasel my way through an answer to that remark. Instead, all I can do is keep quietly working, then abruptly change the subject.

"Uh, um, Lutz. I was thinking that we should change up how many times we're doing this step for each sheet so that we can test out different thicknesses for the paper, what do you think?"
"…Yeah, sure."

Perhaps he thought something was up with my spontaneous topic switch, because his eyes grow even colder as he continuously glances between the work that I'm doing and the expression on my face. As he stares, I keep spreading pulp out over the frame.

Aaaaaargh, I think I just wrecked myself on my own wreckage again…

When enough pulp is evenly spread, I remove the bamboo mat from the paper frame, then transfer the sheet of filtered paper over to the paper bed.

"When you're transferring paper over to the bed, you don't want there to be any space between the new sheet and any sheets that you've already made, so you need to be careful like this about where you put everything down, starting from the first one."
"Let me try."

Lutz sets the mat back into the frame, then starts spreading pulp out himself. Since we're only making small, postcard-sized sheets, it doesn't take much movement to spread the pulp evenly across the surface of the mat. We take turns making sheets, working mostly in silence. Although I'd tried to prepare enough white bark to make

only a few sheets of paper, by the time we're finished, we have a full ten, showing just how off my calculations really were.

Well, making too much isn't actually a bad thing.

"We haven't made very many sheets today, but no matter if we're making a a lot or a little, we'll take this one day's worth of paper and leave it here on the paper bed for a whole day so the water can naturally run off it."
"Then what, after that?"
"Then we slowly start adding weight on top so that we squeeze the rest of the water out of it. We'll put the stone weight on top of it and leave it alone for a day. If we do that, all of the leftover stickiness from the binding agent should go away."
"Hmm…! You know your stuff. Have you maybe done this before?"

Whoa, Lutz's eyes are penetratingly harsh. I've been completely exposed, haven't I. I've managed to wreck everything for myself now, haven't I. I am a complete and utter idiot.

However, since all he's doing right now is staring at me with narrowed eyes, thinking deeply about something or other, there's no way that I'm going to say anything else to finish myself off. I've done enough damage already, so since I don't want to do any more I keep working, indifferently, as if I didn't want to be wasting any time on idle chatter.

If I tried to lie my way through this, I'd probably immediately mess up, and suddenly being perfectly honest with him is far too risky. I'm positive that he'll say *something* once we manage to finish making paper, but I don't know how much of this he's figured out or what he's actually going to say.

I've already thought about how I'd deal with the situation, so there's not really any problem there. I hate painful things, and I hate scary things. If anything like that looks like it's going to happen, I'll unleash the fever that I keep bottled up inside my body, let myself be swallowed by it, and disappear.

Lately, I've been feeling like the fever is getting more powerful than it used to be, so I'm sure it won't take very long for it to devour me once I let it out.

Unfortunately, there's one big new regret that has come into my life since the last time I thought about this. All that's left on finishing this paper is letting it dry out. If we

haven't made any mistakes, I'll finally have been able to make paper so, before I disappear, I want to make a book.

I wonder if I can stall long enough to make a book?

I want to buy myself some time. For now, until I can finish a book, I need to come up with some way to drag things out.

As I contemplate what I could do, I continue jerkily going through the motions of my work.

The next day, we don't talk very much either. We walk to the forest, put the next round of dark outer bark into the river to soak, then do our gathering work. When we return to the town, we drop by the warehouse to put the stone weight on top of the paper bed, but since there isn't a whole lot else to actually do, there really isn't anything to keep me from constantly looking over to see how Lutz is doing. I'm very much aware that he, too, keeps glancing over to look at me.

"Hey, uh…" he says.
"Hm? What's up?"

A tremor runs uncontrollably through my body as Lutz speaks up. I'd planned to be calm and composed, like nothing was wrong at all, but I can't make myself act like I thought I could. While I wait nervously for his next words, Lutz scratches furiously at his head, ruffling his blond hair. He opens his mouth as if to say something, then closes it again.

"…Never mind."
"O… okay."

These are seeds that I have sown myself, so I'm well aware that there's nothing more that I can do now, but as long as things continue like this, there's no way I'll ind any comfort.

The next day, we go to the forest to work on stripping off the outer bark from our next set of materials, making sure not to forget to bring a board to work on this time. This time, the work is far, far more difficult than it was with the tronbay. The fibers are left in tatters as I pass my knife through them. This isn't only due to my own incompetence, though, even Lutz seems to be having a hard time. Tronbay fibers worked so well, but the difficulty of working with this material makes me wonder if we even can make paper out of it.

"…This material's different, so it's way harder, huh."
"Yeah, it really is."

I can't help but let out a sigh as I compare the tattered fibers to our current relationship.

"We can let the inner bark dry like it is, so let's stop for now."
"Mm. Hey, uh…"
"What's up?"
"…Nah, maybe later. I'll tell you when we've made some paper."

Lutz closes his mouth and doesn't say anything more, and I give him a small nod. Inside, I've already prepared myself for the worst. Lutz has noticed that I am not, in fact, Maine, and he's going to blame me for it. After all, ever since that enormous mistake, he's never called me "Maine" even once.

When we finish making paper, I wonder just what kind of yelling I'm going to get? Or maybe is it going to be abuse? Thanks to my overactive imagination, the Lutz in my mind starts screaming worse and worse insults and abuse at me. In my imagination, my heart feels hollow, and I hang my head.

How could you say all that, Lutz! You're so mean! Even though you're a figment of my imagination, you're making me cry! I'm crying!

The next day, we work at the warehouse. First, we hang the inner bark we worked on along the edge of my basket so that it can dry in the sun, and set it outside. Next, we

lift the stone weight from the paper bed, then carefully peel off each sheet of paper and stick them to another board.

"We really should use a paintbrush or something to get all the air out from underneath these sheets, but I guess I forgot to order that too. Ah well, ah well. These are postcard-sized, so if we're careful about it, it'll probably work out."
"…Wow, you forget way too much stuff."

Lutz shoots me a brief glare, but thanks to all of the hideous abuse my imaginary Lutz has been constantly showering me with, something at this level doesn't even faze me. I shrug my shoulders a bit, brushing off the insult.

"Well, make sure you don't forget anything either, next time we do this. …That aside, though, once we let these dry in the sun, they'll be all done. The longer we let them stay in the sun, they brighter white they'll get, too."

Lutz carries the board outside and leans it against a wall so that the sun can hit it. After that, he washes off the paper bed in with water from the well, then sets it next to the board with the paper on it so that it can dry as well.

The bright gleam of the white paper lined up to dry under the perfectly clear, blue sky creates a beautiful contrast. I let out a sigh of satisfaction, wondering if this is the paper that I'll be able to make into a book.

"Haaah, it's paper! It's really turned into paper. …It's really paper."
"Hey, so…"
"Let's let it dry until evening. When it's dry, we'll need to peel it off carefully so that it doesn't rip, then it'll be totally finished."

With the paper so close to being complete, I want to put off having to face Lutz just a little while longer. Perhaps he senses this in my expression, because irritation suddenly flashes across his face.

"Hey, it's basically done, right?"
"…Well, yeah, but…"
"I told you, right? When we've made some paper, I've got something I need to say to you."

The time of my reckoning is at hand. A sharp light glitters in Lutz's green eyes, as if an anger deep inside him is clawing its way towards the surface.

I bite my lip, hard, telling myself that I'll stay standing no matter what he might say to me. Steeling myself, I turn to face Lutz dead on.

Chapter 35
Lutz's Maine

"You want to talk here?" I say. "Not in the warehouse?"
"Here's fine."

Since this conversation might get complicated quickly, I thought it might be better to have it indoors, away from the public eye, but Lutz shakes his head.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

Anger may burn in Lutz's green eyes, but his behavior is comparatively calm. Without suddenly flying into a rage, he begins to speak in a low voice that hints at the anger he keeps contained, boiling in his gut.

"…Who are you, really?"

A difficult question right off the bat. I actually don't quite know what to call myself. Even now, I still think of myself as Urano Motosu, but no matter how anyone looks at me, all they could possibly see is Maine. Also, I've been living in this body for nearly a year now, growing accustomed to life in this world, so I'm no longer really Urano Motosu, either.

Urano only read books, and didn't really do anything else of her own volition. When I went to college, I was commuting to and from home, so I never even moved out of my parents' place. Thanks to the fact that my mother was fundamentally a housewife, I didn't have to do much housework, although I was technically capable of doing it if I ever felt so inclined.

Going to the forest every day like this to gather things for my family, devoting myself to finding new flavors so that I can broaden my diet even just a little, making paper from scratch so that I can read books in the future… none of these things are actually necessary. If you compare the me of right now to the Urano of the past, whose desires were limited to reading whatever book happened to be nearby, we're absolutely different.

As I worry over how exactly I should answer, Lutz takes my silence as a sign that I'm not going to answer at all. He glances at me again, strength flaring in his eyes, and asks me again.

"You know how to make paper like this, and you said you've done this before, right?"
"…It was very different the last time I made it."
"And that's not Maine."
"…Yeah."

Although I still want to hide the truth, Lutz is already convinced of it. Even if I were to lie, nothing would come from it. I answer honestly.

"Maine *couldn't* know anything like that," says Lutz. "She barely ever left her house."

From Maine's memories, I know very well that Maine only rarely left her house. Thanks to that, I had almost no information about the world, and who knows how many problems that has caused me? Since Maine's memories were of almost nothing but the inside of her house, I couldn't even catch a glimpse of what this world would consider to be common sense, and my own modern common sense constantly clashes with that of this world. Even still, I think that I'm making a lot of mistakes.

"That's right," I say. "Maine really didn't know much of anything."
"So, who the hell are you?!" he shouts. "Where's the real Maine?! Bring Maine back!"

Lutz raises his voice, his anger unleashed. However, whether it's because the things I had imagined him saying were far more cruel than the words he hurls at me now, or whether it's because I'd already prepared myself for what was going to come when we'd finished making paper, I feel entirely calm right now. My reaction is vastly different from the panic I showed right after I wrecked myself earlier.

"Sure, I can bring her back, but… I think it would be better if I did that at home, you know?"

Lutz's eyes go wide with astonishment, and he furrows his eyebrows. It seems he didn't expect me to agree.

"Why?"

“Well, it would look really bad if you came home carrying a corpse over your shoulder, right? If I go away, all that’ll be left is a dead body, after all. It wouldn’t be good if people thought you were a murderer, right?”

Lutz and I are the only two people who use this warehouse, and both our families and the people from Benno’s shop know that the two of us came here today. If I were to lose consciousness and die here, it’s extremely likely that all of the blame would be put on Lutz. Even if it wasn’t, Lutz himself would know of his own sin, I think.

I, personally, was thinking of Lutz when I proposed that it would be better to do it at home, but Lutz acts as if this came entirely out of nowhere.

“Y-y-you, w-w-w-what are you saying?!”

Startled by my words, Lutz’s face goes completely stiff as he grows incredibly flustered. It seems that it was far beyond his expectations that Maine wouldn’t come back if I were to disappear.

“S-so, Maine isn’t here anymore?! She’s not coming back?!”
“Yeah, probably…”

I can’t describe it as anything else but “probably”. All I’m able to do is search through Maine’s memories. I’ve never been able to talk to her, and she’s never spoken up to demand her body back.

“Answer this!”

Lutz fixes a powerful glare on me, the picture of an ally of justice facing down a hated evil. I can’t help but smile a little when I realize that. This is so perfectly like him. His frail childhood friend, who he treated like his own sister, has been hijacked by me, a foul villain, and he is leaping to her defense, like the hero he is.

“What about that fever that Maine was talking about with Mister Otto and Master Benno? Did you make her fever eat her up?!”

I’m a little impressed that Lutz put together that Maine had been swallowed whole by the fever that still lurks deep within me. I’m pretty sure he’s not wrong, at least not about that part.

“You’re about half right and half wrong. I also think that Maine was eaten away by the fever. Her last memories are all "it’s hot”, “help me”, “it hurts”, “make it stop”, that’s why. But I’m not the fever. It’s eating me alive too.“
"What are you saying?! Isn’t this your fault?! Didn’t Maine disappear because of you?! Say it!!”

Lutz grabs tightly onto my shoulders and starts shaking me. My thoughts thrown into disarray by agitation, the words “it’s my fault,” and “Maine disappeared because of me” bounce around endlessly in my head. Then something snaps.

“Like *hell* I actually wanted to come here and be Maine! I died, or at least I’m pretty sure I did, and then before I knew it I was this *child*. If I could have actually *chosen* where I was going to go, I’d pick a world with tons of books I could read, or maybe be an aristocrat in this world who could actually read, or even just a body that’s healthier than this feeble, pathetically weak one! There is *no way* that I would *ever* have voluntarily picked a body that is plagued by an incurable disease that constantly threatens to strike me down with fever at any moment!”

The instant I so plainly say that I never wanted to become Maine, Lutz’s face goes slack and hollow, and his hands loosen from my shoulders.

“You… didn’t want to become Maine?”
“Would *you*, Lutz? In the beginning, just leaving the house left me out of breath, and I’d have to stay in bed the whole next day, you know? Even though I can finally make it out to the forest, I’m still growing so slowly, and even now if I make the slightest mistake my fever comes back…”

Lutz thinks about it for a little while, slowly shaking his head. The energy he had when he’d grabbed me has all vanished, and his troubled eyes drift off to the side.

“…You could be swallowed by the fever too?”
“Yeah, I think so. If I loosen the grip I have on it, it immediately rushes back out, and I start feeling like I’m being devoured. It’s something like being swallowed, or maybe like being dissolved… it’s difficult to explain.”

Lutz frowns as he mulls over my words. It seems like it’s also difficult to imagine, just from my explanation.

“That’s why,” I say, “if you’re not happy with the fact that I’m using Maine’s body, and if you think you want me to disappear, just say it. I can disappear whenever you want.”

Lutz, who just moments ago had been yelling at me to bring the real Maine back, stares at me with astonishment. His terrified expression is asking me what the hell I’m saying, which leaves me a little bewildered.

“…It’s better if I disappear, right?”

When I ask for confirmation, Lutz suddenly raises his eyebrows and starts shouting, as if he’s the one who should be angry at me, the victim.

“Don’t ask me! Why are you asking me?! It’s *really weird* to say that you’ll disappear if I tell you to!”
“It’s probably weird, yeah, but… if you weren’t here, I probably would have already disappeared a long time ago.”

Lutz looks like he has no idea what I’m talking about. I start to explain what happened the last time I nearly disappeared, thinking back to how it all began.

“Don’t you remember? When Mommy burned my *mokkan*, how I collapsed?”
“Yeah…”

With an “oh, that’s right, that happened, didn’t it” expression, Lutz nods. To him, that hadn’t been a big deal, but to me it was an enormous turning point in my life.

“Back then, I was thinking I should just let my self be swallowed up. I really was planning to disappear. I didn’t have any lingering attachments to this world without books, and no matter how hard I tried I wasn’t ever able to finish anything, so I was thinking I might as well give up.”

Lutz gulps nervously, so loudly I can hear it. He looks at me, silently urging me to continue, so I gently close my eyes and remember. As I was drowning in the heat, amidst the faces of my family dimly projected across my consciousness, Lutz’s face unexpectedly had risen to the surface.

“When I was being swallowed by the fever, I could see my family’s faces, but then suddenly I saw your face, and I wondered why you were there too. I focused on that,

and gathered up my strength to drag my consciousness back from the fever. When I saw you really were there, I was a little surprised, you know?"
"That's… you can't seriously have come back because you were surprised that you saw me, and not a family member?"

He frowns, sighing, and I gently shake my head at him.

"What brought me back was that I was surprised to see you, but then you said that you were going to go get me some bamboo, so that my mother wouldn't burn it? That made me think that I should hold on for a little bit longer, that I should fight back against the fever."
"Your mom burned the bamboo too, didn't she?"

I nod. I can still clearly recall the anger and chagrin that pierced through me, leaving me with that deep despondency. Even just remembering it makes me feel like the fever within me is growing more powerful.

"If everything really is awful, and I don't actually care about anything anymore, I was thinking, then the fever will just rush in and carry me away. I didn't care enough to fight back anymore, so dying like that might have been a relief, but… then I remembered our promise."
"Our promise?"

"I don't remember a promise," he mumbles to himself. He looks up and to the side, as if he really doesn't remember and is having to dig through his memories. Of course. I smile a little to myself. To Lutz, all he had been trying to say was that I'd better get well soon. Even so, those words were the all-important lifeline to which I clung.

"I promised I'd introduce you to Mister Otto. Didn't you say that the bamboo was advance payment for the favor, so I had to get better?"

Perhaps he remembered something that he didn't want to, but when he hears me clearly identify him as the source of my last lingering attachment to this world, he groans in embarrassment, holding his head in his hands.

"Th… that was! I wasn't trying to make you feel like you owed me… aaargh, no!"
"Then, what were you trying to say?"
"Don't ask! Nothing! Forget about it!"

I want to play the straight man in to Lutz's completely unforeseen reaction, but right now I'm supposed to be being blamed. As Lutz requests, I pretend that nothing's happening.

"Ummm, well, I remembered the promise like that, and then I also thought that I really shouldn't disappear without returning at least one favor, after everything you did for me, so I worked hard to push the fever back, and, um…"
"…"
"So we met Mister Otto and Mister Benno, and I kept my promise, and then we made paper, so even though I want to make a book if I can, I think it's okay if I disappear now, if you want me to?"

Lutz looks at me with a face like he's swallowed a bug. He looks me up and down, with eyes that wouldn't miss even the slightest lie, then hangs his head limply.

"Since when…"
"Um, what?"

I can't hear anything he's saying as he mumbles with his head hung low, so I tilt my head curiously to one side and ask him to repeat himself. Lutz raises his head and stares at me dead on.

"Since when have you been Maine?"
"…When do you think? When do you think that I wasn't the Maine you knew anymore?"

I may have answered his question with another question, but Lutz doesn't get angry. Instead, he looks vacantly off into the sky, thinking deeply. He looks back down at me, mutters something too quietly for me to hear, then looks down at his feet, kicking at the dirt with his shoe.

"…That," he says, pointing at my hairpin. "Was it about when you started wearing that?"

I didn't expect him to guess quite so accurately, but it's true, I'm the only one who wears my hair with a hairpin like this. If my hair weren't so silky and straight, liable to come loose no matter how many times and how tightly I'd tie it, I'd probably be wearing it normally, tied back with a string.

"…Correct."
"That's basically a year ago!" he yells, with such force that spittle flies from his mouth. His eyes flare wide open with rage.

Come to think of it, I became Maine at about the end of autumn. Right now it's about halfway through the autumn, so soon the seasons will have come all the way around once.

"Yeah, I guess that's right. Most of what I remember is being stuck in bed with a fever, but it's been about a year."

My memories of over half of the time I've been living in this world have been of being feverish and bedridden, but if you compare that to the Maine of before who spent the vast majority of her time stuck in bed, I'm remarkably energetic.

"…Has your family noticed?"
"I have no clue. I know they notice I've been doing some strange things, but I wonder if they really haven't even considered that I'm not actually Maine?"

I especially can't think that Tory and my mother, who had to spend so much time looking after Maine while she was secluded in the house, haven't noticed anything at all. However, they haven't said anything about it, and I haven't either. Living like that is very practical, so I think it's more-or-less okay.

"Also, Daddy said that he's overjoyed just that his daughter is starting to get healthier."
"…I see."

Lutz lets out a long sigh, then turns his back on me as if to say the conversation is over. He runs a fingertip along one of the pages of paper clinging to the board, checking it to see how well it's drying. I had been fully prepared to disappear, but when this conversation ended without a satisfying conclusion, I can't help but be troubled about how my future is going to play out.

"Hey, Lutz…"
"…I think your family should decide, not me."

He interrupts me before I have a chance to finish. He's saying that my family should be the ones to decide whether or not I should disappear. However, if that's the case, then nothing will actually change for me right now.

“So, should we keep going like this for now?”
“Yeah, let’s do that.”

I don’t know what Lutz is really thinking, since he’s not looking over here. Does he not particularly mind that I, who am not Maine, am going to continue living like this for the time being?

“And that’s okay?”
“Like I said, that’s not something I should be deciding…”

Lutz stubbornly refuses to look at me, so I reach out and grab his arm. I want to ask him how he feels about me, since I’m not Maine. But, if I avoid such a troubling topic of conversation and just maintain the status quo, I wonder if he’d be alright with that?

“Lutz, is it really okay if I don’t disappear? I’m not the real Maine, you know?”

Lutz’s arm twitches a little bit. I thought for a moment that his arm was trembling a little bit in my grip, but it was really my hand that was trembling.

“…It’s fine.”
“Why?”

As I ask him again, he finally turns around to look at me. With an expression somewhere between shock and amazement, he reaches up and flicks me on the forehead.

“If you disappear, Maine’s not coming back, right? Also, if you’ve been here for an entire year already, then you’re basically the Maine I know.”

He roughly scratches at his head as he speaks, messing up his golden hair. Then, he looks me firmly in the eyes. What I see reflected in the pale green of his eyes is calmness, the anger and threatening attitude from the beginning evaporating away. These are the eyes of the Lutz I’ve always known.

Because before, I hadn’t thought about exercising my body, so I was even weaker. Because if I counted the number of times I’ve actually come face-to-face with Lutz or Ralph, I wouldn’t need more than my two hands.

"…That's why, it's okay if you're my Maine."

When Lutz says that, something deep in my heart clicks into place. Something that had been fluttering about within me settles down with a thump. It really wasn't a big change, so small that you couldn't see it if you looked, but for me, it was the biggest, most important change in the world.

Chapter 36
Paper's Completion

"Aaaaaargh, it's ripping apart…"
"This one, too."

The prototype paper we made out of tronbay worked out well, but batches we've been making to test other kinds of materials have not. I don't know if it's because the fibers aren't adhesive enough, or if they're too short, but they aren't tangling together very well, nor are they sticking together, so as the sheets dry out they start falling to pieces.

"I wonder if it would work better if we add more binding agent…? What do you think?"
"I think we've got no choice but to try whatever we can think of, one after the other."

In order to make the fibers stick together more easily, we try adding more binding agent, and in order to make the paper less likely to tear, we try making it a little bit thicker.

"How about this?" I ask.
"I have no clue about how it'll turn out when it's dry, but it's coming together pretty well, I guess."

The thicker, gluier paper dries rock hard, and when we try to peel it from the board it snaps in half. We stare, dumbfounded, at the fragments as they drop, one by one, to the ground.

"…That's a failure, huh."
"Yeah, this one didn't tear, it… broke? It wasn't actually paper, at least."

I don't know if the problem is with the ratio of fiber to binder to water, or if the raw materials themselves aren't right for the job. At one point, I'd read something about what kinds of vegetation could be made into paper, but in this world that sort of knowledge doesn't really apply. The failures have been accumulating, to the point where I want to scream, "how did this happen?!"

"This is just making me wish we could mass produce tronbay paper."
"There's no way!"

“Couldn’t we make something work as long as we had tronbay seeds?”

I think that, as long as we had some of those red fruit, harvesting enough tronbay would be easy enough, but Lutz shakes his head vigorously when I suggest it.

“Don’t search for them! Do you want to destroy the forest?!”
“If we found a seed, couldn’t we get everyone to quickly cut it all down as soon as it grew?”

I’m a not quite sure about this because I don’t know when tronbay actually grows, but when someone finds a seed they could gather a bunch of people to wait for it to sprout, then as soon as it does they could jump in and deal with it. However, Lutz rubs his forehead, insisting that it’s not a good idea.

“You have no idea when tronbay will grow! It’s too dangerous!”
“Ah, I see.”

It seems like I had stumbled across a tronbay seed that was coincidentally right on the verge of sprouting, but it turns out that tronbay don’t usually sprout immediately after you pick them up. Lutz is starting to get a little angry, so I decide to give up on using these mysterious pop-up trees.

“…Please learn how things work around here.”
“I’m trying, though!”

Since Urano’s memories from my previous life are crammed into my head far more firmly than those of Maine, who rarely left her house, no matter what the situation the raw evaluation criteria I wind up using is still always Urano’s. However, because Lutz and I have been discussing some of Maine’s memories, I’ve gradually started thinking of them a little more, and Lutz has been helping to correct my actions, too.

“Anyhow, using tronbay is dangerous. When tronbay starts sprouting, it drains all the strength from the soil, so for a while after it sprouts nothing else can grow there. We can’t mass-produce it.”
“Whaaat?! It’s that dangerous?! But nothing like that happened last time, right?”
“Didn’t I say that was weird? Did you not hear me or something?”
“I don’t know anything about normal tronbay, so I had no idea if anything about that was weird or not.”

Tronbay has been the best material so far, but since it's such a dangerous plant, and since it only grows in the autumn, mass producing it would be impossible. Rather than wishing for something that doesn't exist, it's much more useful to be thinking about if there's something we can find that actually exists. So, we had no choice but to keep searching through trial and error.

While we were doing that, we had to consider whether any of the wood that we can easily find in the forest is actually something that's mass-producible. Also, we needed to think about the ratios of materials, try crushing the fibers more or less, using sulamo bugs instead of edil fruit for the binding agent, and so on, in order to try to make gradual improvements in the final product.

"Out of these, forin seems to be the best for this."
"Yeah. If we add just a little bit more sulamo glue to the forin, it looks like we get something good enough to sell."

When we tested the three soft woods that the lumberyard recommended to us, we found that forin was able to make the thinnest paper. Forin fibers, compared to those of the other two varieties, are a little stronger. This makes them harder to beat into shape, but the more we beat it, the more stickiness is released from the fibers. Once we discovered that, we were able to make a comparatively good paper by beating the fibers thoroughly. Then, when formulating the pulp, we tested gradual changes to the ratios of the various ingredients that we used until we found the best proportions we could.

I write down the proper ratios on my slate, then clap my hands together to shake the dust from them.

"I think we've got it now, right?" I ask.
"Yeah, if we make it like this, it looks like we can mass-produce it."

Lutz's face is bright now that we've found the proper ratios. I happily run a fingertip along the surface of our completed paper.

"Mass production is going to have to start in the spring, though. Getting more wood right now is going to be a huge pain, and bark in the winter is going to start getting tougher and tougher."
"Yeah, you're right."

We'd make much better paper if we waited until spring arrived and the plants came to life again, then went to collect young trees and new branches. Besides, the weather is already such that bleaching the bark in the river is already a very painful process. I want to wait for it to get warm for Lutz's sake, too.

"So, let's get our finished paper over to Mister Benno as soon as possible. I'm going to have to start helping Mister Otto at the gate for the winter, after all."
"Yeah. In a little bit we're going to have to start preparing for the winter, so we should get this finished as fast as we can."
"Right. Tomorrow I'll go to the gate and ask Mister Otto about how to write a thank-you note. We were finally able to make paper! I want to show him my thanks."

Lutz nods his agreement to my suggestion, as he starts gathering up the remains of today's failed experiment.

"I'll leave the thank you note to you, then. So, you're going to be bringing today's failed paper home with you?"
"Yeah. We'll take the successful paper to Mister Benno, but I can use the botched paper, even if it has some holes or is peeling a little bit, to make a book."

I've already confirmed with Mark that it's okay for me to bring home the large quantity of failed experiments. With this, I can finally start working on making a book

The next day, I return to the gate; my first time in a while. As winter accounting season comes around, all the necessary documents for processing the calculations have been gradually piling up, so Otto's face is positively radiant when he greets me.

"Hey there, Maine! I've been waiting."

He pats the accumulated pile of wooden cards sitting next to him, smiling *brilliantly* as he beckons to me. The cards are covered with totals of goods and quantities, and it looks like Otto is in the middle of writing everything out into the official documents.

As I help him out with that, I eventually try asking him about how to write a thank-you note.

“Mister Otto, if you could, I’d appreciate it if you could show me how to write a thank-you note.”
“A thank-you note? Like what the noblemen exchange?”

Well, no, it doesn’t have to be like what a noble does, I almost start to stay, but I stop myself. Perhaps it really is a custom that only noblemen practice.

“Umm, I figured that since there are letters of introduction, then maybe there was a letter of thanks from the people who got introduced… was I wrong?”
“Well, I know that noblemen exchange those among each other, but it’s not something that merchants explicitly write. It’s a waste of paper to use it on something that’s not a contract.”

Of course, paper is such an expensive commodity that they wouldn’t use it so lightly.

“Then, how should they send thanks?”
“For a trader, you usually give the other party something from what you trade in that they might find useful. It doesn’t really matter if you have an attendant deliver it or if you deliver it yourself, but you don’t send a thank-you note, you send a gift.”

I thought that there was going to be a general format for a thank you note, like there’s one for a letter of introduction, and that I could write one on a sheet of our finished paper, but he’s telling me that it’s normal not to send a note, but instead to give a gift.

“…Whoa, I didn’t expect that. Hey, Mister Otto. What do you think I should give to Mister Benno? I can’t think of anything that Lutz or I could possibly send to him that he would want.”

I really can’t think of anything that I personally have that Benno might possibly be interested. Benno seems to be a man who has everything.

Otto shrugs his shoulders, then gives me some advice.

“Wouldn’t the paper the two of you’ve be a good gift? That’s all you two trade in right? If it has value as a commodity, then showing Benno that his initial investment is paying off would be the best. Besides that… maybe information on some kind of new product… or something like that, I think.”
“I understand. Thank you very much, Mister Otto.”

Something to increase the value of the paper, or information about a new kind of good, huh… I might be able to come up with something like that.

The next day, I immediately rush to Lutz to propose to him my idea for the paper we should make to show Benno our thanks.

"It turns out that merchants don't say thanks by sending thank you notes. They give each other something that they think they'd like. So, I think we should make some special paper out of tronbay for him. We still have some tronbay inner bark, right?"
"Yeah. We should give Master Benno the best paper we can, shouldn't we? …Hey, Maine, what've you got there? Leglas?"

He looks down at the red leaves I brought with me.

"Oh, is that what it's called? I found it growing next to the well, so I picked some yesterday. I want to try doing something like pressing flowers, I think."
"What are you going to do with those?"
"I'm going to use them to make paper, of course!"

Leglas is a plant that looks like a red clover. I thought that we might be able to put it in the pulp after we spread it out, substituting it for the maple leaves that would be used for that in *washi*. I make a message card with leaves arranged along the edges of the page, like a bookmark or a piece of nice stationery. I also cut up some of the leaves into smaller pieces, then scatter them on another page in a heart shape, making something kind of like *chiyogami*.[1]

On the message card, I write "Because of you, Mister Benno, we were able to make this paper. Thank you very much." Lutz and I sign our names at the bottom.

"This paper is really pretty," says Lutz, looking at the other sheet.
"Since it's got leglas in it, it's kinda showy, like it's got a picture drawn on it, you know?"
"What are you going to do with it?"
"I'm going to make *origami*," I reply.
"Oh-ree-gah-mee?"

I take the *chiyogami*-like paper I made and use my knife to cut it into a square, then fold it into a celebration crane.[2] In my old memories, *shuriken* patterns were the most popular with people from overseas, but I don't know if anyone here has ever seen a throwing star before. I don't have enough paper to make something large like an origami balloon, either.

A celebration crane is a simple, yet flashy design that I can make with a single sheet of paper. Since its tail spreads out wide, like a peacock, it's far more extravagant than an ordinary crane.

"What do you think? Is this showy enough?"
"…Wh, whoa," he says, timidly, lightly poking at the crane. "You can make paper do something like this? Man, I have no idea what you're capable of, Maine."

I'm a little taken aback by his reaction.

How much would a crane like this be worth?

"…Now that I think about it, making decorations out of paper would be super extravagant, wouldn't it?"
"A~ah, w…, well, since it's for Master Benno, it's alright."

I'd been thinking that origami was lighthearted, cheap, and comparatively unusual, so it would make a nice gift, but now that I'm actually thinking about how expensive paper is here, I'm wondering if I've just done something monumentally wasteful.

…I wonder if I should make sure to tell Benno that he can unfold it and still use the paper, despite the creases?

"I was also told that information about some kind of new product would be good…"
"You've got better ideas for that than me, right?" asks Lutz offhandedly, shoving the entire burden onto me.

It's not that I have no ideas whatsoever, but I don't know if any of them are actually at all salable, so I want to ask Lutz for his opinions.

"…When we first met Benno, he looked pretty interested in my hairpin, so I was wondering if we should teach him about those, but this," I say, pointing at my head, "is basically just a wooden stick, isn't it?"

Lutz gives a big nod. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just a stick.”
“You think he could sell them?”
“…People can make them themselves, so it’s not the kind of thing you’d really just go out and buy, I think?”

I’d thought that, even though it was unusual, it wouldn’t really be salable, and Lutz seems to agree.

“If you want hairpins you can sell, how about that other kind? …You know, like the one Tory wore during her baptism, or like that.”
“Lutz, you’re a genius! That got an amazing reaction back then, too! And I think making those would be great to do for our winter work, too.”

With this, we’ve completed our preparations for what we’re bringing to Benno. Next, we need to figure out the circumstances, then make some time with him to meet.

“Hey, Lutz. When you go return the lock today, could you ask Mister Mark what Mister Benno’s schedule looks like?”
“Yeah, sure thing.”

On the day that we arranged with Mark, Lutz and I head to Benno’s shop, bringing with us the completed paper. Our finished product has both tronbay- and forin-based papers, each in three different thicknesses, for a total of six different varieties. With that, we also are bringing the message card and origami celebratory crane, into which leglas has been pressed for color. I also have Tory’s hairpin in my tote bag as well, so that we can consult with him about it.

“Good morning, Mister Benno. We’ve finished a prototype of our paper, and have brought it with us. We were able to finish it so quickly thanks to your generous initial investment.”
“I heard about it from Otto, but you’re done already?”
“Yes, sir. Here it is.”

I draw the sheets of paper from my tote bag, then arrange them on Benno’s desk in front of him. When he sees them, he looks at them with slight amazement, then reaches out for the first sheet.

“Well now, let’s take a look.”

He holds it up to the light and tests it for feel, then takes out a bottle of ink. He tears off the top part of one of the sheets, then draws a line across it with his pen.

“…This is good for writing on. The nib doesn’t get caught in this as easily as in parchment, so it’s easy to write… though the ink is spreading just a little bit. Not enough to make a difference though… hmm!”
“Did we do it?!” I ask. “Can Lutz be your apprentice?”

Benno strokes his chin, grinning broadly as he reaches for the next sheet.

“Yeah, I did promise that, after all. How many of these can you make?”
“Ummm, since this is just a prototype, if we start making it for real, I want to use larger tools. I think that these sheets are a little too small. What would be the best size of sheet for us to be making?”

The letters of introduction I saw at the gate were all different sizes, so I don’t know what the standard would actually be for making paper. If we were to be making paper the same size as actual *washi*, the paper frame we’d need would be far too large, and it would take a tremendous amount of strength to spread out the pulp evenly over it. If Lutz and I aren’t able to make consistent, quality paper at that scale, there’s no point in trying, so I want to focus on mass-producing paper of the most widely-used size.

“…Hm, let me see. For letters of introduction and contracts, we usually use sheets about this size. It’s not a precise standard, though.”

The sheet of parchment that Benno pulled out from the shelves behind him is sized somewhere between an A4 or a B4 sheet of paper.[3] It’s a size big enough that we can still swing the paper frame by hand.

“Okay, I’d like to make another paper frame, of about that size. Although, it’s only going to be practical to make paper again in the springtime. For now, we really can’t keep getting raw materials.”
“Just get all your tools in order by springtime, then. Work with Mark on that. This’ll be a great product once you’ve done that.”
“Yes, sir!”

Benno's given his approval of our paper. Thrilled that our hard work has finally paid off, I exchange a look with Lutz, smiling broadly.

"This is a much higher-quality paper, huh."

The sheet he currently holds in his hands is one of the ones made from tronbay. At a single glance, the difference in quality is obvious. It is both much whiter and much smoother.

"This was made using tronbay."
"Did you say tronbay?!"

Benno's head snaps up, startled, and he looks back and forth between me and Lutz. It looks like tronbay really is famous for being such a dangerous plant. I take a step back, letting Lutz give the explanation as to what happened so that I don't inadvertently say something foolish. Lutz, reading my intentions perfectly, takes a step forward, opening his mouth to speak.

"While we were gathering things in the forest, Maine stumbled across tronbay that had just started growing, which is how we got this. It's very dangerous to get, though, and finding it is unreliable, so I think it will be very rare for us to make."
"Well, I guess that makes sense… Still, tronbay, huh…"

Benno seems to be frantically thinking if there's anything he might be able to do to make mass-production of this happen. Despite the fact that he's making that calculating merchant's expression, it seems that this is the rare case where he can't actually come up with a way to get what he wants.

"After several tests, we determined that tronbay was the material that made the best quality material, but we can't make it into a commodity if we can't actually acquire the raw ingredients. Also, this paper here is made from forin. Since forin is much easier to find, it's much better suited towards mass-production, and thus commoditization."
"Ah, I see," says Benno, nodding vigorously. "Forin is definitely much better for production."

Since it seems that the paper has met his satisfaction, next I take out the thank-you gifts.

“Now, this is… a thank-you note, to you, Mister Benno. I heard from Mister Otto that the best way to thank you would be to show you how we could add value to the paper we’ve made, so we tried making a special paper for you.”
“A thank-you note? I’ve given these to some high-ranking noblemen, but this is the first time I’ve gotten one myself. How do I say this… I feel like I’m moving up in the world.”

Benno smiles broadly as he takes the message card from me. When he opens it to look inside, his eyes go just a little bit wider.

“Um,” I say, “while we were making this page, we added leglas to the mixture. …What do you think?”
“Ah? When you say ‘leglas’, you’re talking about that weed that sprouts here and there around this time of year? …When you see it like this, it’s rather beautiful. This would be quite popular with the noblewomen and their daughters, I think.”

Benno, as a merchant, is very reliable: as soon as he saw that, his thoughts immediately went to trade. He looked at it with his merchants eyes and judged it as something that he could sell to the nobility. I’m sure that we’ve successfully shown to him that we’ve managed to add some additional value to this paper.

“Ummm, and I don’t know whether to say that this is a thank-you, or a gift, but… this is a decoration that I made from paper. It’s called a *'celebration crane'*.”
“Hoh! This is paper, too?”

I take the folded crane from my bag, spread its tail back out, and set it on the desk in front of him. He reaches over to pick it up, his eyes gleaming. He turns it over in his hands, looking at it from all angles, but no matter how hard he looks, he won’t find any use for it besides as a decoration.

“After I made it, I realized that I’d just done something very extravagant. It doesn’t have any use other than as a decoration. Um, though, since the paper is only folded, you can use it as regular paper again if you unfold it, although there will still be creases.”
“No, it’s just fine being a decoration, isn’t it? This seems like a good advertisement for the paper I’ll be selling in my shop.”

Benno places the crane on one of the shelves behind him, murmuring that once he starts selling paper he’ll need to move it to those shelves instead. It seems like the

little crane will be living on a shelf for a while. Honestly, I had no idea that origami was going to be this well-received. In retrospect, I'm actually a little glad I made it.

"To be honest," says Benno, "I didn't think you could make paper out of wood. The quality is also far beyond what I was expecting it to be, if you even could. This, however, is more than good enough to sell as a commodity. Well done! I'm looking forward to seeing you start mass-producing this in the spring."

When Benno delivers his high valuation of our efforts, Lutz and I grab each other's hands joyfully. Thinking back on all the time we spent gradually improving the quality of the product, I'm suddenly moved to tears.

"We did it, Maine!"
"It's 'cause you worked so hard, Lutz."

Benno smiles wryly at the two of us, stacking the paper back up on top of his desk.

"I'll buy this paper from you today. I'll pay you on the way out, so call Mark for me?"
"Really?!"

Now that I think about it, we *had* talked about how, before our baptism, we would get to keep the money from selling the paper, minus material and handling fees.

Finally, my first real cash!

If we turn the rest of our processed white bark into paper now, then we can probably sell that too. As soon as I think that, I suddenly remember something else, and I take Tory's hairpin, which I wanted to talk about selling, from my bag.

"…Also, I had something I wanted to consult with you about; do you think that this is something that we could sell?"

I place the hairpin that Tory had used as a hair ornament on top of Benno's desk. It's a short wooden pin, decorated with a bouquet of small blue and yellow flowers.

For some reason, Benno's face twitches and goes very stiff as soon as he sees the hairpin.

"Young lady, what is this?"

“It’s a hair ornament. After someone ties her hair back normally with a string, she can then use this to decorate it. …Like this.”

To demonstrate, I swap out Tory’s hairpin for my own and show it to him.

“This particular one is something that I made for my older sister’s baptismal ceremony, so I can’t sell it, but if I make more decorations like this while I’m doing my winter handiwork, do you think I could be able to sell them?”

As I ask my question, Benno keeps his glittering eyes fixed on the hairpin. In a low voice, he growls out an answer.

“…You could.”
“Then, I think I will. Then, um. Mister Benno, I’ll let you sell them for me, so would it maybe be possible for you to provide the initial investment for these too, please?”

He lets a loud, long sigh, then looks me in the eyes. He suddenly seems very, very tired, but I wonder if I’m just imagining it?

“What on earth do you need?”
“Just thread. The quality doesn’t need to be particularly high, but I’d like as many different colors as possible, please.”

Making every single one of them using the same colors would be very boring. Besides, I’m sure that everyone is going to want to pick ones with colors that match them the best, so it’s a good idea to have as many colors and designs as possible.

“Just thread? Nothing else?”
“I’d be happy if we could get a little wood, but since we’re already going to be gathering a lot of firewood for the winter, we don’t particularly need it.”
“And you’re doing all this yourself, young lady?”

Benno glances at me, scowling. Now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure we’re in a “Maine thinks, Lutz makes” kind of situation. Perhaps it would be best for Lutz to help out as well.

“…Lutz will handle the woodworking portion, and I plan on handling the rest. Of course, we’ll be making them together. Right, Lutz?”

“Right,” he says, gripping my hand tightly as he nods frantically. “I’ll handle the wood parts.”

Benno scrutinizes us carefully, looking like he has something he wants to say, but then sits back, covering it up with a forced, happy smile.

“Well, sounds good to me. So, you two, do you have some time and energy to move around a bit?”
“Yes, we do.”
“Alright. So, let’s head to the Merchant’s Guild, shall we?”
“The Merchant’s Guild?!”

Whoa, once again, some new vocabulary just showed up. I wonder, is this going to be like a medieval European guild, or a fantasy world guild…? What the heck kind of place is this going to be?

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. Chiyogami is brightly-colored, patterned paper used for a variety of decorative purposes. It’s typically made by applying a pattern to the paper using ink applied either through wood block printing or through silkscreening.
2. Celebration cranes are very showy origami cranes with wide tails folded so that both sides of the paper, which are usually different colors, are outwardly visible.
3. For American audiences, A4 paper is slightly skinnier and slightly taller than letter paper (8.3" x 11.7") and B4 paper is about as tall as legal paper but somewhat wider (9.8" x 13.9").

Chapter 37
The Merchant's Guild

Currently, I am being held in Benno's arms as we make our way to the Merchant's Guild. Originally, I was making every effort to walk there myself, but Benno started to get fed up with my walking speed. "So slow! This is a waste of my time," he said, and picked me up. Then, he started ranting on and on about the importance of time, which I had no real way to argue against.

"By the way, Mister Benno," I say. "What *is* the Merchant's Guild?"

Finding out all of the little details that are different from what I think I know is my top priority.

"What, you don't know?"
"I've never been to it. Lutz, do you know about it?"
"It's a place where people who do business go, maybe?"

I asked Lutz just in case this was something that any child in this town should know about, but all I got out of him was what I was expecting. Benno sighs lightly, then starts to explain.

"…Well, that's about right. Its main job is to do things like grant permits to people who want to open new shops or punish people who are doing bad business. If you don't have the guild's approval, you can't run a shop and you can't open a stall in the town market. Also, every person involved in a business must be registered; if they aren't, the guild lays down very harsh penalties."

Based on what I'm hearing from Benno, I guess it might be something like a department of commerce? You can't open a shop without getting approval, and you have to register new apprentices there, so I don't think I'm too far off the mark.

"They sound like they're a very powerful organization," I say.
"That's right. They've very powerful, and very *greedy*. When you register an apprentice, there's a registration fee. When you start a new business, there's a very large registration fee. No matter what you do, they take a commission from it."

It looks like things are the same whenever money is involved, no matter what world you live in. This is a terrible world for a poor person to live in.

"Either way, once the baptismal ceremony is over, my new apprentices are registered here, since everyone working at my store is involved in trade. In your case, you'll need a provisional registration until your actual baptism. If you don't, then you won't be able to sell your paper or your hair ornaments… or any kind of good."
"So, in order to buy the paper from us today, you need us to be registered first?"
"Right."

Ah, I see. His rush to get us registered is so that he can purchase our prototype paper. I chuckle to myself, pleased that I figured that out. Benno, however, gets a stern look on his face, his eyebrows knotting together.

"I'd really like to get you through registration quickly, but that old *bastard* is going to get involved. Every time, that man never fails to find some bone to pick."
"Like what?"

Benno's brought out some less-than-friendly language. I thought that he'd be fairly high up in the guild himself; was I wrong? Or, perhaps, is there some sort of inter-factional dispute happening here?

"Right now, I've got a lot of momentum going, expanding on a few different ventures so I can grow my shop. It's only natural that the guild chief would want to tear me down a little, you know? So, you two, don't say anything unnecessary, got it?"
"Yes, sir," I say, in unison with Lutz. Two highly skilled merchants are about to engage in a battle of wits against each other. I have no plans to stick my nose in where it doesn't belong.

"Ah, that's right. Maine, about that hairpin you brought…"
"This one?" I say, opening my bag slightly to show it to him.
He nods, then fixes his sharp, reddish-brown eyes on me. "How long does it take you to make one?"
"If I already have all the materials, and Lutz makes the wooden part, then after that, if my physical condition is good… ummm, this flower part, if I work really hard I can do it in a day, probably… I guess…"

It depends on the actual quantity of flowers, but at my speed it's a day's worth of work. My mother, though, who is good at sewing, could probably do it in about two bells' worth of time.

"How about you, Lutz?" asks Benno.
"It's just carving and polishing some wood, so it'll take me about one bell, I think?"
"Hmm! That's great," he says, good-naturedly.

Benno's tone of voice may be light and pleasant, but his eyes glitter with a sharp light.

"What's so great?" I ask.
"I'm looking forward to what's coming up after this," he replies, smiling the same vicious smile a predator makes when it's found its next target, his eyes locked on the Merchant's Guild building as it comes into view.

The Merchant's Guild is in a tall building on a street corner that overlooks the town's central plaza. Just that alone shows that it is a very wealthy organization, but on top of that, not a single room in the entire building has been rented out to anyone else. The entire building is the Merchant's Guild's alone.

"When I think about how much of my hard-earned money gets funneled into this building," muses Benno, "I can't help but get a little mad, you know?"
"That's true, but if you didn't, you'd be in big trouble, wouldn't you?"
"Yep. And that makes me even madder."

Before the door stand two guards, each carrying weapons. As we approach, they look us up and down, then ask us what our business is here.

"What are you here for?"
"Getting temporary registrations for these two," replies Benno.
"Head on in," says the guard, opening the door for us.

As soon as we step through the doorway, we're suddenly faced with a flight of stairs, and I'm momentarily bewildered. While the staircase itself is wide, there's no sign of the first floor at all.

"Mister Benno, what happened to the first floor?"

“Ahh, the first floor is for the traders to park their wagons and carts. It would be a huge nuisance if they all were lined up on the street outside. If you go around back, you should be able to see them.”

We ascend to the second floor, entering a large hall, packed full of people constantly rushing about. I can’t help but be amazed by the overwhelming clamor. I hadn’t thought this town had this kind of people in it, until now. I feel a strange sort of admiration.

“We don’t have anything to do here,” says Benno. “We’re heading to the stairs on the other side so we can get up to the third floor.”

Since I’m still being carried in Benno’s arms, I’m relatively safe as we make our way through the crowd towards the stairway, but Lutz, following behind us, keeps almost getting crushed in the crowd.

“Lutz, are you alright?” I ask.
“I’m fine, yeah… This is kinda like a festival, huh.”
“That’s because this is the place where both people who want to open stalls in the town market and traders who want to do business in this town have to come to get official permission,” says Benno. “The closer it gets to market, the busier it gets. After the market closes, it’ll be quiet for a while.”
“Huh…”

The stairs we arrive at are sealed tightly behind a metal fence. In front of it stand yet more guards.

“May I see your registration card, please?”
Benno pulls out some sort of metallic-looking card and hands it to the guard. “The three of us are going up.”
“Understood, sir.”

For some reason, the guard holds the card up high. Suddenly, a brilliant white light runs along the bars of the fence, and it disappears into the ground as if it were melting away.

“Wha–?! What’s that!!” I ask, my eyes wide.
“A magical tool. Lutz, don’t let go of my hand. You’ll be pushed back if you do.”
“G… got it.”

Benno carries me with one arm, taking Lutz's hand in the other, and starts to ascend the staircase.

"Didn't you say that magic was something that only the nobility could use?" I ask.
"The upper levels of this organization are pretty well-connected with the nobility. There's quite a lot of noblemen who'd give out magical tools like this if they thought it would give them some kind of advantage."
"It's my first time seeing anything like this…"

I'm struck by the same thought as I had back when I saw the contract magic. Somehow, I've found myself in a world that's even more fantastical than I thought.

When we reach the top of the stairs, Benno lets go of Lutz' hand and sets me down. White walls extend past the stairway for a ways, until they arrive at a place in the back that looks something like a counter. While the second story handled business relating to the town market, the third story deals with the merchants who own shops. Compared to the second story, it is much quieter, and there are far fewer people here.

The floor of the second story was made of wood and slightly dirty, with small piles of dust accumulating in the corners. The third story, however, is carpeted, and swept scrupulously clean. The furniture is also well-maintained here, further emphasizing that this place has plenty of money. This is, in a single glance, a stunning example of how stratified this society is.

"There are conference rooms on the other side of these walls," says Benno, pointing at the white walls. "You two won't have much need to use them."

As he explains things, we start walking towards the counter. Lutz and I hold each other's hands, feeling slightly nervous in the face of the kind of wealth that we don't ordinarily see in our daily lives.

Passing the conference rooms, I can see that the counters stretch wall-to-wall, behind which children, perhaps apprentices, seem to be processing the income and expenditures of the Merchant's Guild, reading from wooden notes and performing computations on their manual calculators.

"Lutz," I whisper, "this winter you really need to learn how to read and do math."
"…Yeah, I really do."

Partway down the corridor, on this side of the counter, there's something that looks like a sofa in what appears to be a waiting area, or perhaps a reception area where one could be invited to relax. I turn around, surveying my surroundings. I notice, against one wall, a set of shelves on which a variety of wooden cards and rolls of parchment have been arranged.

"Is that… is that a bookshelf?!"

My energy level suddenly skyrockets. Benno looks down at me with curiosity in his eyes, then nods.

"Yeah, those are bookshelves. They contain copies of the regulations that apply to shops, simple maps of the surrounding area, almanacs of the nobility, and so on. …Are you interested?"
"I am! I am!!"

I want to immediately charge towards the bookshelves, but Lutz's grip on my hand is like a vise, squeezing so tightly that I can't get away. Watching me struggle, a wry smile tugs at the corners of Benno's mouth.

"You can take a look after we've gotten your application filled out. It'll probably be a long wait, after all."
"Really?! Yaaay!"
"Maine," says Lutz, "calm down. You're getting too excited."

I've finally found book-like things that are okay for me to read, do you think I can possibly contain myself? No, I absolutely cannot. Lutz's warning technically does register in my ears, but it's nowhere near enough to stop the wild dancing of my heart.

At least, that's what I thought, until Lutz says something that forces me to stop dead in my tracks.

"If you get too excited, you'll faint before you get a chance to read anything."

…That would be terrible!

Benno, who has been watching our exchange with some amusement, notices that this is a good breaking point. "Come," he says, continuing to walk towards the counter. As

we approach, an employee that seems to be familiar with Benno looks up, an ingratiating smile on her face.

"Oh, good afternoon, Master Benno. How may I be of service today?"
"I'm here for temporary registration for these two. Can you handle both of them for me?"
"Temporary registration? …These aren't your children, are they?"
"They're not. *But,* I need them registered. Quickly, please."

It seems that a temporary registration is effectively a loophole in the regulations, where the children of merchants can be allowed to help out with the family business even though they're unbaptized and, by all rights, should not be allowed to be working, let alone be registered. Since it's impossible to hire a child that hasn't yet been baptized, children who aren't directly related to a merchant would thus have no actual reason to be involved in any transactions. As such, it's impossible that a temporary registration would be granted to a child that isn't a blood relative of a merchant.

Although she squints dubiously at us, she dutifully begins to ask me and Lutz a series of questions, writing something down on the other side of the counter. From what I'd heard so far, I had been thinking this would be a long, bureaucratic process, but this is just simple data entry: our names, our fathers' names, where we live, our ages.

"The son of a carpenter and the daughter of a soldier, is it?"

When she finishes her questions, her expression grows all the more dubious as she looks back and forth between the two of us. It seems that she's searching for some reason why we should be registered, even though we're not the children of merchants. Her eyes are not exceptionally pleasant.

"That's right," says Benno. "If you're done with the questions, let's move this along. I don't think either of us have much free time to spare on this."
"Very well, I'll be back shortly. Please, feel free to sit over there while you wait."

She gestures towards the reception area. I'm nearly crushed by my desire to immediately run off to the bookshelves, but I instead look up at Benno.

"While we wait, may I look at the bookshelves?"

“Sure. If there’s anything you’d like to know, I can show you. Come and wait over here. Lutz, don’t let her out of your sight.”
“Got it.”

Lutz and I calmly walk to the bookshelves, his hand clamped firmly around mine. I go through the contents of the shelves, unrolling the parchment scrolls and glancing through the stacks of wooden cards, looking to see what kind of information they contain. It’s all eminently practical information: maps and illustrated references, almanacs of the nobility, rules of business, block-printed news sheets with information from nearby areas, and so on.

“Whoa, look at this map!”

It’s a particularly rough and sketchy map, but this is the first time I’ve gotten a look at what this world looks like. I have no idea where even we currently are on this, so I tuck the scroll under my arm and head to the sofa where Benno is currently sitting. I sit down on the sofa in the manner in which one usually sits down on a sofa, only to realize that this beautiful clothy surface is, in fact, merely a piece of cloth attached to the hard boards of the wooden bench underneath. It has none of the softness or flexibility I was expecting, so instead my butt slams hard into the unyielding surface.

“Owww…”
“How excited do you have to be to throw yourself into a chair like that. Are you an idiot?”

I whimper softly as Benno stares at me with frank amazement. I was deceived by something that looked like a luxurious sofa in this strange environment, you know! If I had been able to see the wood this is made of, I wouldn’t have thrown myself into it like that. I keep these excuses in my heart, though, as I spread the map wide on the cloth-covered surface of the bench we are sitting on.

“Mister Benno, where’s this town on here?”
“Right here. Ehrenfest. That’s the family name of the lord of the land, so that’s the name of the town.”

This is the first time I’ve heard the name of this town. Come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve heard the name of the lord, too. Since there’s not been any reason for me to go outside the town, there’s never been any need for me to learn its name, and whenever people refer to the lord they just refer to him by his title.

Looking at the map, it seems that there is an agricultural village and a forest to the south of Ehrenfest, and if you go beyond that, there's another small town. To the west, there's a large river, with another town belonging to the neighboring province relatively close by. Since the lords of those provinces share a good relationship, it seems that it's popular to come and go between those two cities. To the north is the aristocratic town where the feudal lord resides, so there's a large blank area. To the east, a major highway stretches, where it appears the largest number of traders operate.

"Well, when you two wind up going outside the town to do any purchasing, you're probably not going to need to go off this map, anyway."

After Benno teaches us the names of a few of the other towns on the map, I return the map to the shelves, and once again start going through every last document on the shelves. On the very bottommost shelf, there are books that seem to be intended for apprentices to learn how to read words and numbers. Lutz and I flip through it to study its contents. In addition to the words I already know, I see quite a few more vocabulary words relating to commerce. I want some time to memorize all of these.

"Mister Benno, could we maybe get a slate and a calculator so that Lutz can study…?"
"Sure, I'll take the cost out of your pay today and get those for you. Study hard, kid."
"By the way, could you tell me something, please? When a merchant's kid becomes an apprentice, how well can they read, write, and do math already?"

After we're baptized, the two of us will be working as apprentices with the children of merchants. Until then, we need to do as much as we can to make sure that we can do all of the things that they can do.

"They can read and write simple things and do basic calculations. For reading, they mostly know the names and related words of the goods their family trades in. For math, they know how to do the conversions between copper and silver coins, too."

This is bad. I don't really know anything about the local currency. I already know that large and small copper coins exist, as well as small silver coins, but I don't know what the exchange rate between them is, nor their actual market value.

After all, at my house, all we really use is copper.

I don't think I've ever really seen many coins that weren't made of copper. Also, when I'm doing my work at the gate, I'm only working with raw numbers. Otto handles all of the actual money, and I haven't really seen him do it.

"I think where the two of you are most lacking is knowing how to treat customers. The other children have watched their parents at work every single day, so it's basically instinct for them by now."
"That's…"

That's impossible for the two of us. In Japan, I was only ever on the receiving side of customer service, and never actually stood behind the register myself. Lutz, as well, probably knows nothing that a merchant might actually know.

What should we do?

Before I can fall too deeply into a labyrinth of thought, the employee behind the counter calls out to us.

"Master Benno, the guild leader would like to meet with you."
"…As expected of that old bastard," he mutters, in a voice so low that only we can hear it.

He stands up from his seat, eyes glittering coldly, his hands tightly balled into fists, the very picture of a man preparing to head into battle.

"Let's go, you two."
"Yes, sir."

Benno starts heading towards the counter. With a clink, the closest panel to us on the counter falls to one side, opening a path for us to go through. On the other side is another staircase, at the top of which is a door that opens automatically for us. Through it lies a room that, although it's not particularly large, seems very comfortable.

A fire is already burning brightly in the fireplace, spreading warm light across the carpet. On top of that carpet stands an official-looking desk, with a gentle-looking old man who, despite seeming to be in his fifties, still possesses a somewhat decent physique. Since "guild leader" sounds very much like a purely managerial position, I

had been imagining a much more grandfatherly type, but I can see that this man has not yet aged past the prime of his life.

“Hey there, welcome,” he says, standing up from behind his desk with a warm, genial smile. “I’m glad I could get a chance to chat with you.

"Now then, Benno, let me get straight to the point. Why on earth are you asking for a temporary registration for these two kids, who aren’t even your blood relatives? This isn’t at all like when someone managing a street stall comes to ask for permission for their kid to watch the shop for them from time to time, am I right?”

A crafty smile crosses the guild leader’s face, silently telling us that Benno’s insistence that the two of us be immediately registered without first waiting for our baptismal ceremony is basically exactly the same thing as him saying that the two of us possess some sort of goods that it is worth getting us registered for.

“…If I don’t know what you’re trying to do,” he says, “I can’t give permission to get these kids registered, you know. There’s no precedent at all here in Ehrenfest for registering kids that aren’t blood relatives.”

The guild leader looks the both of us over, with a contemplative smile that is completely impossible for me to read. His smile and his general demeanor seemed quite friendly at first glance, but this man is truly not friendly at all. After all, he just threatened us with rejection if Benno doesn’t immediately answer his question.

Seeing the guild leader waiting expectantly for an answer is making me grow increasingly nervous, so I look up at Benno to see how he’s taking it. However, Benno wears the darkly triumphant look of a man who feels absolutely assured of his victory.

“You want to know what these two kids have that I want, yeah?” he says, smiling broadly.
“Yeah, I guess I do. Since it’s a thing, after all, *any* store could probably trade them, after all. Your shop is starting to reach a little too wide, I’m thinking.”

If it’s something that could make some real money, he wants a chance to seize it, he’s saying. Mister, shouldn’t you be at least *trying* to hide your real intentions?

“These kids have said they want to sell things through my shop, so they’re going to sell them through my shop. Right, Maine? Am I right, Lutz?”

We're still scared of accidentally saying something unnecessarily, like Benno warned us not to do, so the two of us gulp, then nod emphatically. Benno smiles even more brightly, then looks down at me.

"Maine, please show the guild leader the hairpins that you'd like to start selling at my shop."
"…Understood, sir."

It seems that Benno still intends to keep our new paper trade secret for now. I don't know what thought process he took to arrive at this conclusion, but since I don't want to say anything I shouldn't, I keep my mouth firmly shut as I reach into my tote bag. I pull out Tory's hairpin, and hold it out for the guild leader to see.

A moment later, the guild leader's expression completely changes.

Chapter 38
The Guild Leader and the Hairpin

"This…" murmurs the guild leader, transfixed.

The only time Tory used this hairpin was during her baptismal ceremony. What happened on that day, I wonder? I'm a little shocked about how suddenly the guild leader's aloof smile completely disappeared, so I look back at Benno, seeking some kind of assistance.

The guild leader's captivated by this, is he okay?

While I may be worried, Benno is clearly not. A terrifying expression flickers across his face, like a carnivore licking his chops, before it settles back into his usual darkly pleasant smile.

"Is this not the hairpin you've been searching for, Guild Leader?"
"You're selling this?!" asks the guild leader, his eyes wide, looking back and forth between me and Benno. There isn't a trace of a smile on his face anymore as he looks at us hungrily. Terrified, I can't stop my breath from catching in my throat.

…Lutz, no fair! You're hiding behind Benno!

I turn slightly to try to creep behind Benno as well, but he firmly clasps my shoulder, dragging me back to the forefront.

"Umm," I stammer, "I was planning on making these during my winter work."
"Your winter work… then, could you sell me that one right now?"

He reaches out as if to take Tory's hairpin from me. His blazing eyes tell me that if he gets his hands on it I'll never get it back, so I frantically shove it back into my bag.

"I can't do that," I say. "This is something I made for Tory. It's not for sale."
"I'll buy it for this much," he says, his hand coming up in a flash, three fingers standing straight up. That's probably some sort of sign to indicate a value, but I don't know what exactly it means.

Flustered, I look up at Benno for advice.

“Hmm, I see…” he says, grinning broadly. “If we could ask for a little more, we might be able to make one in advance especially for you, sir. What do you think, Maine?”
“It’s… it’s just like Mister Benno says, sir.”

As if I could possibly refuse. I force a smile onto my face and comply with his implicit order.

“If she starts now,” he says, “She should have plenty of time to complete it before your granddaughter’s baptismal ceremony this winter. Isn’t that right, Maine?”
“Yes, more than enough time.”

…Ah, now I see. During the summer’s baptismal ceremony, the guild leader’s granddaughter must have seen Tory’s hairpin and said that she wanted something just like it.

With that one statement, everything finally snaps into place. As the leader of the Merchant’s Guild, this man would be the most informed person in the entire city about the flow of merchandise through the markets, but even so, he couldn’t find a trace of this hairpin. Since it’s something I made entirely in-house, solely for Tory, it was never on the market, and nothing else like it is sold anywhere, he must be growing more and more nervous as the day of the winter’s baptismal ceremonies draws ever closer.

“There’s barely a month left, are you sure you can finish it?”

Come to think of it, making the flowers requires a surprisingly large amount of both time and thread, so in this extremely hectic season, unlike during the winter season where we’re shut inside by the snow and have nothing else to do, we don’t have time for making random things, or so my mother said. However, if this is a job that I’d be making money on, there might not be any problem with me devoting all of my time to it. Since I’ll need to procure the thread and talk to the granddaughter about her specific request, it’ll take somewhat more time than otherwise, but if I have until the winter baptismal ceremony, I should have more than enough time.

“Yes, sir. This hairpin isn’t for sale, but there won’t be any trouble making a new one.”
“Yeah,” says Lutz, nodding emphatically, “we can do it.”

Next to me, Benno has been grinning broadly as he listens to our conversation.

“However,” he interjects, “since I can’t register these two, when they finally finish making the hairpin, they most unfortunately won’t be able to sell it…”
“Tsk… Fine then, after we get their temporary registrations complete, let’s work out the details of the order…”

With that, Benno’s victory over the guild leader seems to have been clinched. The guild leader was unable to find serious fault with him, he didn’t reveal any information about the paper, and he was able to secure our temporary registrations. In high spirits, he turns to head out of the guild leader’s office.

“Well then, shall we go back downstairs?”
“Hold up,” says the guild leader. “I can take care of their guild cards in here, so why don’t you let the children wait here? I’d like to work out the details of the order, too.”

Benno clucks his tongue quietly, then looks back, smilingly, over his shoulder at the guild leader.

“If I left the kids here alone, I don’t even know what kind of troubles they could blunder their way into, so why don’t I stay here and make sure to keep an eye on them for you?”
“No, no, these kids seem to be very well-raised! I’m sure they won’t cause any trouble if they’re out of your sight for a minute. Right?”

Though the guild leader may be smiling kindly, I’m scared of whatever he could be scheming underneath that. Cautious of the fact that I could be suddenly stolen away, I unthinkingly grab for Benno’s hand.

“Th… this is the first time I’ve come here,” I say timidly, “so I want to stay with Benno.”
“You see?”

Smiling triumphantly, Benno sits down on the hard bench that the guild leader has in his office, picking me up and setting me on his knee. “Good work,” he murmurs in my ear, gently ruffling my hair. He seems to be in a very good mood.

Shortly thereafter, I’m relocated to a spot on the bench next to Benno, with Lutz sitting on my other side. The guild leader sits down across from us, and we begin discussing the details of the hairpin.

“Well then,” he says, “I want one hairpin, delivered before the baptismal ceremony.”
“Umm… what color should I make the flowers? Do you know what colors she likes, or what might fit her hair, or…”
“I don’t really know much about that. Just make it like that one,” he says, pointing at the pin inside my totebag.

However, that kind of blunt declaration is actually somewhat problematic for me. I am very sure that Benno is massively overcharging the guild leader for this, so I want to make sure that I’ll be producing a product that his granddaughter is going to be absolutely delighted with. I have no doubt that this grandpa, who went to great lengths to find a hairpin for his granddaughter, thinks that her smile is the most priceless thing in the world.

“Umm, could I maybe speak to your daughter directly and ask her about what she would like? I believe she’ll be much happier if I could do so.”
“I want to surprise her, so I’m trying to keep this under wraps.”

There it is! That ever-troublesome surprise gift!

In order for someone to be truly delighted by a surprise gift, the giver needs to be very certain of the recipient’s tastes and desires, and present it to them at just the right time, when they’re thinking that they want something like that. Grandpa, though, is saying that he doesn’t even know what his granddaughter’s favorite color is, which makes a surprise gift much more challenging.

“…Umm, well, it’s important that the hairpin matches the dress she’ll be wearing, and it should fit with her hair color as well. And if she’s already found something else that she’s going to wear in her hair, then wouldn’t she be troubled by getting a new hairpin?”
“Ah, really?”

Since it’s the winter ceremony, preparations are probably already underway for the dress she’ll be wearing. If that’s the case, it’s possible that her mother is also working on something for her to wear in her hair.

“Since I’ll be making it from scratch, I feel that it’s most important that she receive something that she truly wants, even more than something that merely matches her tastes. Wouldn’t you agree that her look of joy would be more wonderful than a look of surprise?”

“Hmm, I see…”

The guild leader strokes his mustache, looking up at the ceiling as if in thought.

“Maine, was it?”
“Yes, sir.”
“Would you like to come to my shop?”
“She refuses!”

Before I even have a chance to react, Benno rejects the proposal.

“My shop is much bigger than Benno’s,” continues the guild leader, “and we trade in some very good things. It’s a great offer, isn’t it? You still haven’t actually had your baptismal ceremony and officially become apprentices yet, so it’s still possible for you to come apprentice at my shop. How about it?”

How about it, he says, but after all of the support I’ve received from Benno so far, I have no intentions at all to do him the injustice of spontaneously switching to another shop.

“I owe a lot to Benno that I can’t pay back,” I say.
“Hmm, I’ll pay him back for you.”
“What? Ummm…”

I have every intention of refusing, but the words won’t leave my mouth. As Benno watches me waver under the guild leader’s relentless pressure, his mood grows worse and worse. His eyebrows crease together as he taps his temple repeatedly, looking at me with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“Maine, *kindly* give your response to the guild leader. Your rejection, if you would.”
“I… I mu, mu… I must refuse!”
“Mm, well, that’s a shame, but I guess I’ll give this up for now. You’ve got someone scary standing over you, after all, so you can’t say what you really want.”

He’s giving up *for now*?! But I’m already telling him what I really want!

“If you’re going to be meeting with Freida, my granddaughter, how does tomorrow sound? It’s better to get these decisions squared away sooner rather than later, isn’t it?”

“Umm, couldn’t Mister Benno come with me?!”

Earlier today, Benno had thoroughly engraved the words “don’t meet with the guild leader alone” into my consciousness. Meeting with him without someone present who can actually handle him would be very dangerous. However, the guild leader shakes his head in reply.

“Unfortunately, both Benno and I have a meeting tomorrow. If you’re just meeting with another girl your age, you don’t need a stern old man like him watching over you, do you?”
“…Alright, if it’s just us kids.”

Caught in the middle of Benno’s battle with the guild leader and focused on the plan to ask Freida about her wishes, I’ve started to wear down a little, so without thinking about it too much, I consented to a meeting with only another girl my age. Benno, hearing me agree with the guild leader’s opinion, clucks his tongue disapprovingly.

What?! Did I do something wrong?!

I glance between Benno, whose eyebrows grow even more creased, and the guild leader, whose smile grows even wider, and suddenly realize the stupidity of my reply. By agreeing for it to only be “us kids”, I’ve made it so that Mark won’t be able to come with me. Frantically, I kick my brain into full power, looking at both sides, trying to figure out what to do.

“S… since Lutz is going to be working on making this too, it’s alright if he comes too, right? Si… since it’s just us kids!!”

Going entirely by myself is too scary to consider. When I suggest dragging Lutz into it too, though, Benno seems to relax just a little bit.

“Well, that’s fine too,” says the guild leader. “Now then, how does meeting in the central plaza at the third bell sound? Freida can come out to meet you there.”
“Sounds good, sir.”

As if she had been waiting for the conversation to conclude, the staff member from earlier enters the room, carrying temporary membership cards. It appears that our temporary registration has been successful.

“These are your temporary membership cards. These are magic tools as well. They’re absolutely necessary when you’re conducting any sort of business discussion. Benno can explain the fine details about that later. Since this card shows that you two are essentially a shop’s apprentices, you’ll be able to use it to access the upper floors of the building.”

This mysterious card is made of a strange, pale metal that glimmers with rainbow colors as the light strikes it. Compared to the things I normally interact with, this is almost unnecessarily different. The more of the explanation I listen to, the more I admire this obviously fantastical card. Faced with the wonder of a magic tool, I can only blink in response.

“Now then, the last step is for the two of you to push some of your own blood into the card so that it can recognize you. If you do that, other people won’t be able to use it arbitrarily.”
“Wha?! B… blood?!”

Does all magic require blood? The memory of having to slice open my finger and make a blood seal for the contract magic is still very fresh in my mind.

“Give it up, Maine,” says Lutz.
“Lu~uutz…”
“It’s *fine*, just give me your hand. …It’s not like you’ll do it yourself, right?”
“Oooohh…”

Tearfully, I extend my hand. Lutz pricks my fingertip with a needle. A drop of blood immediately wells up from the wound, to which he presses the card, which seems to absorb it.

In the next instant, it brightly flashes.

“Whoa?!”

It flashed with light for just a moment, but afterwards, it looked exactly like it had before. Not a trace of a bloodstain or a fingerprint has been left behind, leaving it as perfectly clean as it was before.

Magic tools are really convenient. But scary.

Although I had been frightened of drawing blood and startled by the card's bright flash, Lutz finishes his own task almost disinterestedly.

"With that," says the guild leader, "your registration is complete."
"Thank you very much," I reply.

I run after Benno, who has already started leaving the room now that there's no longer any reason for him to be there, then leave the Merchant's Guild building entirely.

All we did was get registered, but now I'm very worn out.

"Welcome back, sir. It seems you were able to successfully get these two registered?"

When we return to Benno's shop, Mark is there waiting for us. Although from time to time I've seen a merchant's dark smile cross his face, Mark is, fundamentally, a supporter, and his pleasant smile always heals me.

"Yes!" replies Benno. "Thanks to Maine, we won a flawless victory today."
"Oh ho! How rare."
"She caught that old bastard's eye, though."
"…That would seem to be rather dangerous indeed."

Even Mark seems to regard the guild leader as dangerous. I must agree, from the bottom of my heart.

"Please, right this way," he says, opening the door to Benno's office and showing us in. "I've made arrangements so that we can settle the accounts regarding the prototype paper."
"Well then," says Benno, "let's wrap this up then, shall we?"

As soon as I heard "settle the accounts", though, my hand rocketed into the air.

"Excuse me! I have a question. Could you please teach me about money?"
"Huh?"

Benno frowns, not understanding what I meant, Mark, similarly, has his head tilted to the side in puzzlement.

“Ummm, well, until now, I’ve never actually held any money… I can read numbers very well, but I don’t know how the numbers and the money actually match up. …Let’s take 5,640 leon, for instance; I don’t have any idea at all how to use coins to pay that amount, or anything like that.”
“What?!”

The wild shout of disbelief was not just Benno’s. Mark and Lutz both joined in as well.

“You…” says Benno, slowly, “haven’t touched money… Well, you’re not a merchant, and you’re such a young kid, so maybe that’s not strange? Wait, no, that still is strange, right?”
“…Oh!” says Lutz. “She never gets sent out on errands, since she faints so easily.”
“Ahh…” they all say, breathing a collective sigh of understanding.

“I do calculations at the gate, but I’ve never actually watched anyone exchanging money with the merchants. When I went with Mark to go place orders, too, all we really did was hand over order forms, and we really didn’t exchange any money. I’ve been to the town market a few times with my mother, and I’ve seen her use some small coins to buy things, but I don’t know what those are or how much they’re worth.”

As I explain, Mark retrieves a small cloth bag, then steps forward in front of Benno. With a jingle, he spreads the contents of the bag over the desk.

“Then, perhaps I should first show you the different kinds of coins.”

There are coins minted out of a light brown metal, perhaps copper, in three different sizes, and there are both small and large coins made out of silver and gold. Lutz, fixated on the gold coins on the table, gulps audibly.

“This small copper coin is worth ten leon. The mid-sized one here with the hole in the middle is one hundred leon, and the largest is one thousand. The small silver one is ten thousand, and the pattern continues through this large silver coin, and these small and large gold coins.”

Since it’s very easy to remember that ten of a small coin is exchanged for one of a large coin, I’m much more at ease, nodding my head in comprehension as Mark explains. To

my right, however, Lutz moans quietly to himself. It seems that he is completely and utterly confused by higher orders of magnitude.

We're going to study *very* hard this winter.

Once he starts having money of his own, I think he'll probably learn how to calculate with it, so it'll probably be all right.

Benno takes out the six sheets of prototype paper, then lines them up on the desk.

"A full sheet of parchment is worth one small gold coin. A sheet the size we use for contracts is worth one large silver coin. A sheet about this size, then, would be about two small silver coins, I think.

A postcard-sized sheet is worth two small silver coins, he says…

I knew in theory that paper was expensive, but now that the money is being set out right next to it, I suddenly gain a new appreciation of that fact. Come to think of it, I did hear that a contract-size sheet would have been an entire month's salary for my father, didn't I?

"So, this time, let's use parchment as the basis for figuring out the price of this paper. I'll pay two small silver for the forin paper, and four small silver for the higher-quality tronbay paper. I'll take a thirty percent commission from that. Next, you said you'll be needing a new paper frame, larger than the one you used for this prototype. I'll go ahead and take the price of that out of the total now. That'll be another fifty percent."
"Alright," I reply, nodding. Since we've managed to complete our prototype, from now on the cost of any tools and materials will be entirely our responsibility.
Benno smiles broadly. "How does a twenty percent share sound, this time? In the future, you'll be ordering raw materials through the lumberyard, and the market price might go down once more paper starts to circulate, so we might have to revisit this in the future, but…" "This is fine with me," I say.

I nod in agreement, then turn to look at Lutz. He nods as well, with an expression I have no idea how to read.

Benno sets a wooden calculator on the desk with a thunk and pushes it towards Lutz.

“Lutz,” he says, “that’s three sheets of forin paper and three sheets of tronbay. Alright?”

Lutz pushes a few things around on the calculator, inputting the price for three sheets of forin, but after that he pauses, bent finger trembling in the air, and hangs his head in defeat. He can do calculation in one digit, but when the quantities or the varieties increase, he loses all hope.

“How about you, Maine?”
“Umm, *‘two times three is six and three times four is twelve’*, so it’ll be eighteen small silver coins total. Twenty percent of that will be three small silver and six large copper for both Lutz and my share together, so each of us will get one small silver and eight large copper.”

I blink a little as Benno stares at me. Behind him, Mark smiles wryly.

“That’s correct. That really is amazing, to be able to compute that on the spot without a calculator.”

I, however, can’t even use a calculator at all, so this winter I’ll need to be practicing right alongside Lutz. I need to be as familiar with my surroundings as possible.

“Next… Lutz, I’ll take the cost of the slate and slate pencils out of your individual portion. That’ll be two large copper coins.”

Two coins are pulled from Lutz’s share, and in exchange he receives a slate and a few slate pencils.

“Now, you can carry this money with you, but if you’re going to have trouble finding a place to store it, you could instead deposit it at the Merchant’s Guild for safekeeping. Which would you prefer?”

It seems that the Merchant’s Guild also functions as some sort of bank. Having a lot of physical cash on hand is somewhat terrifying, and since one day I’d like to be able to buy a book, I’d like to have some sort of savings account.

“Please give me the large copper coins. I’ll be giving them to my mother. I’ll leave the silver coin with you, if you could please deposit it for me.”

It had been one of my dreams as Urano to show gratitude to my parents by giving them my first real paycheck. It's okay if I manage to fulfill that dream here instead, right?

"Alright. Lutz, what about you?"
"I'll do the same as Maine."
"Alright then."

I receive eight large copper coins, then Benno and I touch our guild cards together. They make a sharp pinging noise, like the plucking of a string, then we take them back. Nothing on the card seems to have changed at all.

"Now, you'll be able to take out your money on the third floor of the merchant's guild. Eventually, you're going to need to go there and practice doing that."
"That makes sense," I reply.

Benno smiles wryly at me as I stare at the card in my hands, spinning it around in my fingers. Mark seems to share similar thoughts. Lutz touches his card to Benno's as well, then collects six coins. The feel of the cold metal in our hands sets our hearts racing.

"This… is the first time I've ever held money," I whisper.
"We've *earned* this ourselves, you know?"

I think back on all of the many failures we faced before we successfully made paper. Seeing this money after all of that is moving me deeply.

"When spring comes, let's make a lot of paper, and let's sell it all," I say.
"Yeah!" replies Lutz.

My mind still fixated on my first ever earnings and feeling completely satisfied with the afternoon's events, I look up at Benno.

"This is everything we needed to do today, right?" I ask.

However, my words only cause Benno to grimace, and he flicks me on the forehead.

“Hey, don’t be stupid, kid. *Your* battle is tomorrow. You’re going to be facing off against that old bastard’s granddaughter, *alone*, with no adults there, you know? With that *thoughtless* look on your face?!”
“What?! But, um, she’s just a child, and we’re both girls, right?”

I can’t imagine this being anything you’d call a battle. All I’m going to do is meet Freida so that I can ask her what she wants, and the guild leader isn’t going to be there, so is “facing off” really the right phrase to use?

“According to the rumors, it sounds like the granddaughter that old bastard really dotes on is the one kid amongst all his grandkids who’s the most like him.”
“Sh… she takes after the guild leader?”

I try to imagine what the guild leader’s face would look like on a young girl, but my imagination fails me.

“Well, you’re bringing Lutz with you, so that’s a little better. You won’t get overwhelmed. Lutz, you shouldn’t say anything you don’t need to, but if that girl tries to steal Maine like the guild leader did earlier today, you need to immediately refuse. Personally, I have no idea where that old bastard’s hidden his traps. Got that?”
“Got it.”

Lutz nodes vigorously, an earnestly serious expression on his face. Is it really necessary to make this big of a deal out of this meeting, though? We’re talking about an unbaptized little girl, right?

As I lean my head to one side doubtfully, the coins audibly rub together in my hand.

“…Come to think of it,” I say, “how much did you agree on for Freida’s hairpin? The guild leader made some sort of sign with his fingers, but I didn’t know how to read it…”
“The sign that old man put up meant three small silver coins. When I said we needed to ask for a little more, that made it four coins.”

This is extremely startling to hear. Even factoring in the price of the thread, this is massively overcharging for just a single hairpin.

“Th… what? What?! That’s a ripoff!”

“Make sure you’re done on time. This winter’s baptismal ceremony is going to be a great advertisement, so that’ll affect how well we can sell them afterward.”
“Um, so, adjusting the price is…”

With a sharp glare, Benno banishes my last glimmer of hope.

“You think I’m pulling one over on that geezer?”
“No, not at all.”

I hang my head dejectedly as I reply. I’m going to have to make a pin that’s worth four small silver coins, so there’s more than just a little bit of pressure on me.

“Even after my introduction fee, my commission, and the materials cost, you’re still going to make, what, fifty, sixty percent of that? Put your heart into this, kids. It’ll be fine! Look, that old bastard finally managed to find the hairpin he was looking so hard for, but you wouldn’t sell the one you were holding right in front of him. That makes it seem even harder to get, right? Then, he’s asking that you do something that you’d ordinarily be doing as your winter handiwork *right now*, in the middle of this amazingly busy time of year when everyone’s trying to prepare for winter, *and* sell it to him by this winter’s baptismal ceremony, before it’s even gone to market, so his granddaughter can wear something nobody else is? That’s what that price means. Don’t worry about it, kid.”

So, if you can come up with a few excuses, it’s okay to blatantly rip someone off, he’s saying? Seriously, give me a break.

Chapter 39
The Guild Leader's Granddaughter

The next day, before the third bell has chimed, Lutz and I wait in the central plaza for Freida to arrive. Now that I think about it, though, I actually haven't heard at all about Freida's hair color, mannerisms, eye color, or anything else of that nature.

"What do we do, Lutz?"
"She's going to wave to us when she gets here, probably?"
"…I wonder if she'll recognize us?"
"She will. Your hairpin is super unique, and plus her grandfather is right in there so if she goes to ask him, she'll be able to pick us out right away, right?"

Lutz, shrugging, points to the Merchant's Guild building that overlooks the central plaza. As he says, Freida could probably identify us immediately.

"Hey, Lutz. How did it go at your place yesterday? My folks were…"

Yesterday, Lutz and I sold our paper to Benno, then returned home with our first earnings. At my house, my entire family's eyes all went wide upon seeing the money, and when I told them the story about how Lutz and I had worked to make paper, they praised me, saying things like "amazing!" and "you must have worked hard!". Then, after I added my first-ever pay to our living budget, we bought a fair amount of a precious luxury item during the winter preparation days: honey.

"How about you, Lutz? Are they happier with you becoming a trader now?"

Lutz, working with me, successfully finished our-making project, and was accepted by Benno to be an apprentice as his shop. What, though, would his family think, I wonder? Would they approve of his enthusiasm?

Lutz shrugs, smiling bitterly. "It went… questionably. They were overjoyed about the money, but they're still not sold on the idea of me being a merchant. My dad was all, 'you said you made paper with Maine and sold it, so why not be a craftsman and make paper?' He'd said he'd happier if I was just a craftsman."
"Your dad *really* wants you to be a craftsman, huh."

I understand how someone can take great pride in making things for a living, but Lutz's dreams are very different. It's hard to find a middle ground.

"But I don't *want* to be a craftsman. I want to be a merchant like Benno, able to leave the city. Maine, you didn't just want to make paper, right?"
"Right. My next step is to figure out how to mass-produce it. Then, I want hand off the actual production duties to someone else and work towards making books. If there aren't more books in the world, I can't own a bookstore, and my dream of being a librarian is always going to be a dream."

If I want books to proliferate, then just mass-producing paper isn't going to be enough. A printing technique is also absolutely necessary. I can't let myself be satisfied with books made out of loose stacks of memo paper.

…The road ahead is still very long.

"If I could run a bookstore with you, Maine, that would be great! Yesterday, when I saw those bookshelves at the Merchant's Guild, I started thinking, who's going to want books? People who can read, so rich people, right?"
"Yeah, I guess you're right."

The commoners in this town can't really read, so of course there's no way they're going to want to buy books. 'Books? What're those? They tasty?' they'd say.

"So, if we're selling books, then we're going to want to go and sell them to the nobility of a lot of different towns, right? Like maybe the lord of the next town over, like we saw on the map."

When I consider the types of customers that might be buying books, he's making a fair amount of sense.

As I idly admire Lutz for how he solidified his own goals while silently staring at that map, I hear the patter of small footsteps coming up to me and stopping.

"Pardon me, but are you Maine?"
"Um?! Uh, yes!! I'm Maine. You must be Freida?"
"That's right!" she says, beaming. "Pleased to meet you."

Her cherry-blossom hair is done up in pigtails, and her light brown eyes show a hint of a gentle smile; a sweet and adorable little girl. I don't know if it's because of good breeding or very rigorous home discipline, but her actions and manner of speech are more grown-up than I was expecting, in contrast to how small she is for her age. I can't say much about the person herself, but she gives off an unbalanced first impression.

However, no matter how hard I look, I can't see a trace of the guild leader in her. Maybe it was just a rumor that she resembles her grandfather the guild master? I'm glad Benno was worried for nothing.

She looks over at Lutz. "Are you Maine's friend? I was looking forward to it just being us girls…" Her cheeks puff out in just a hint of a pout.

Certainly, talking with another girl my age does have some appeal, but that's usually restricted to only when the other girl is a close friend. Today, our destination if the guild leader's house. I have no desire at all to go there by myself.

In response, I immediately grab on to Lutz's hand, smiling at him.

"I'm not really strong, and I faint a lot, so if I don't have Lutz here with me I can't really go outside. Even if I go to Mister Benno's shop, if Lutz doesn't come with me, they won't let me in. So, if Lutz can't come today…"

Before I can get the words 'I'll have to go home' out of my mouth, Frieda suddenly bursts into a question.

"It's dangerous if nobody's watching you, and you faint a lot… Maine, do you perhaps have… the devouring?"
"Huh? …Devouring?"

Unconsciously, I tip my head to the side, hearing this unfamiliar term. Frieda has her head tilted in the opposite direction, her hands held lightly to her cheeks.

"Do you not know the word? …How do I say this, is there something hot deep inside you that moves around against your will?"
"There is!! That sickness, do you know about it?!"

Information about this disease, which nobody so far has known anything about, has suddenly appeared from a completely unexpected source. Both Lutz and I lean forward eagerly, waiting for her reply, but she gives a slightly troubled smile.

"…I had it as well. That's why my body is still so small, you see?"

It seems like both my small stature and the fact that I collapse if I lose lose focus even slightly are caused by this "devouring" illness. When I compare myself to Freida, who also looks like she could be two or three years younger than she really is, I'm suddenly taken aback.

"Is… is there a cure?!"

She just used the past tense. In other words. She's cured. After I briefly exchanged a glance with Lutz, the question leapt hungrily out of my mouth. Freida lowers her eyebrows apologetically and answers in a low, sighing voice.

"…It's expensive. Really expensive."
"Whoa, it's hopeless, then…"

For the granddaughter of a successful merchant who serves as the leader of a guild to say something is "really expensive", then there isn't the slightest hope that my family will be able to purchase it. I hang my head low, dejectedly, and Freida pats me gently on the shoulder.

"But you seem so healthy, Maine! As long as you keep your eye set on a goal and work towards it with all your might, you'll be fine. Be careful, though, because if your will falters or you lose sight of your goal, then you'll face the backlash."

I see. It's because I had my mind set first on going to the forest, and then now on making paper, that I've been so healthy lately? When I gave up on my last objective I *did* come close to death, huh.

Huh? Isn't this like those migratory fish that literally die if they stop swimming?

I groan quietly to myself as I carefully file this new information away inside my head. My sickness is called the devouring. Today, I finally learned its name. Also, I learned a method to manage it. In order to stay healthy, I need to be constantly moving towards a goal.

“If you have no more questions, shall we head to my house?”
“Sure,” I reply.

The house that Freida leads us to has a shop on its ground floor, much like others in the area. It’s considerably large, and far closer to the castle walls than Benno’s is. In fact, it might not even be accurate to describe the building as “close” to the walls. It is right next to them, and has the best view of the temple that one could possibly get.

“I really love watching the parade to the baptismal ceremonies, you know, and I watch them every single time. During this summer’s parade, I saw that hairpin. It stood out so much for me.”

If her house is here, then she’d be able to have an excellent view of the entire procession as it enters the temple without even having to leave her front door.

“Since it was the first time I’d seen anything like it, I asked my grandfather if he had any information about it, but he wasn’t able to find anything out about it. Then, in the fall ceremony, when I saw that they hadn’t spread around, I thought it was very mysterious…”
“These do require some time to make,” I say, “so unfortunately I really can’t make them unless it’s the middle of the winter, when I have a lot of time on my hands.”

Or so my mother insists, I add, in my head.

“Is that what happened…”
“If I can sell them, then you should be able to see many girls wearing ornaments like these come next spring’s ceremonies.”
“Well! So, that means that I’ll be the only girl wearing one this winter, right? I’m looking forward to this!”

When I see her face light up, I remember how Benno had said “sell it as a special service by the winter’s baptismal ceremony, before it’s even gone to market, so his granddaughter can wear something nobody else is.” I see now that this would be like a special premium product.

It may be premium, but still, is it okay to rip them off like this? I’d really prefer not…

The building that Freida's home and her grandfather's shop is in seems to have been rented out entirely to the store's employees. Not a single person who doesn't have any connection to the store lives in this building, it seems.

When we reach her home, on the second floor of the building, I suddenly stop dead in my tracks, stunned.

There's so much *cloth* in this room. I thought the same thing when I had visited Otto's house before, but that was only when I was in his parlor. However, no matter where I look in Freida's house, I see tapestries and cushions in a brilliant display of overflowing color. Also, on the shelves, there are stone figures of animals and metal sculptures. It is very obvious that this is the home of an exceptionally rich family, one with the political clout to live so close to the nobility.

"Refreshments, young lady?"

After being brought to the drawing room, the woman working as a servant here brings something to drink. This red liquid is served not in the wooden cups I'm used to seeing, but in metal ones.

"Ah, thank you," Freida replies. "This," she says to me, "is a beverage made by adding water to a syrup made by adding water to colde juice. It is very sweet!"

Colde berries are very much like raspberries, so I perhaps this is something like raspberry juice. As I ponder, I raise the cup to my lips, and find that it's much sweeter than I expected. It's so rare for me to taste sweet things, and I belatedly realize that my careful expression has disintegrated into a genuine smile.

"So sweet! Lutz, this is delicious!"
"It really is! Sweet *and* tasty!"
"I'm so glad you enjoy it! …Now then, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

Freida tilts her head very slightly to the side as she asks her question, and I wonder just what the guild leader actually told her. Since I have no way to actually tell, perhaps giving her a full explanation myself would be the best idea?

"To be frank, yesterday, your grandfather commissioned me to make you a hair ornament that you could wear to your baptismal ceremony."

I take Tory's hairpin, which I'd brought as an example, from my tote bag. Freida glances at it, then nods slightly.

"That much I had heard. However, I'd have expected my grandfather to just arbitrarily decide on something like that without any input, though."

As expected of a grandchild. She is absolutely correct. Her grandfather had been running wild and ordered this hairpin entirely on his own, intending for it to be a total surprise.

"Ummm… he did say something to that extent, but I personally thought that you'd be far happier with a hairpin that was not only your favorite color but also matched your clothing as well, so I asked him if I could meet with you to discuss what you would truly want."

Freida's hair is the color of cherry blossoms. In other words, it's a light pink. A hair ornament that was made to match Tory's blue-green hair would absolutely not fit her hair color. An image starts to form in my mind; perhaps reddish flowers, or maybe even white ones, set in contrast to green leaves to pull everything together.

"Ah, I *thought* that was a little too unusually thoughtful for my grandfather, but it seems you were the one who reined him in?"
"Anyhow, if it's alright with you, could you please show me the clothing that you're going to wear to the ceremony? I'd like to look at the colors that were used in the embroidery."

I had intended to dodge that particular topic and turn the conversation away from the subject of the guild leader, but Freida, perceiving this, chuckles softly to herself.

…Are all the children who have had such high-class training so mature?

Both her actions and her manner of speaking are maybe even more adult than mine. At the very least, she's a very different person from the other kids that I go to the forest with.

"Wait just a minute," she says. "I'll go get my dress for you."

As Freida leaves her seat, Lutz lets out an unnecessarily over-exaggerated sigh. He rolls his shoulders and shakes his head from side to side, limbering up his body as if staring silently had been a tremendously difficult task.

“Are you doing okay, Lutz?”
“I couldn’t really join in the conversation. I dunno anything about how clothes and colors match up, and I can’t really make myself talk that fancy, you know.”

When Freida and I were talking, I’d unintentionally started talking in a much more polite manner. Since I had also been very concerned about accidentally saying something out of place, I nod emphatically in agreement.

“Yeah. When you start working, you’re going to need to know how to talk fancy like that, but you can let me do that talking today when we’re asking her what she wants. Staying totally silent like that is probably really hard, but I’d be very worried if I didn’t have you here, so please stay with me!”
“Yeah!”

Just having a friend nearby is reassuring. Just as I breathe out sigh of relief, Freida returns.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting. This is the dress I’ll be wearing.”
“Whoa, amazing!”

Freida has brought out the dress that she’s planning on wearing to her baptismal ceremony. Like Tory’s, white serves as the foundation for the garment, but unlike Tory’s, the material is far thicker. To be specific, Freida’s dress has parts of it that are fluffy, like fur, and it looks very warm.

Suddenly reminded of the countless, countless layers I have to wear during the winter, puffing me up like a ball, I groan quietly to myself. During the summer ceremonies, everyone wears thin fabrics, so what’s important isn’t just the money you have to spend, but also the skill with which the garment is put together. For the winter ceremonies, though, one’s purchasing power makes a much bigger difference, it seems.

“Freida, do you like this color?”
“I do. That’s why I had my dress embroidered in it, you know?”

Having discovered embroidery done in a reddish thread amongst the white of her dress, I compare it to the color of her hair. If I use this color, I should be able to match both her dress and her hair.

"Do you by any chance have any of this embroidery thread left over?" I ask.
"I do, I think; what do you need it for?"
"I think that, for consistency's sake, I should make the flowers the same color. May I ask you for a little bit of it? I can try to find a thread that's the same color."
"Sure, that's fine with me."

I'll get a small piece of thread from her, then ask Benno to find me more thread that matches that color. Since Benno has already negotiated a ludicrously high price, I think I can afford to be picky about the thread being used.

"Will this be enough, I wonder?"

Freida returns with a ball of thread so large that she could probably have her dress fully embroidered a second time.

"That's… certainly enough, but…"
"Then, I'll leave it in your capable hands."

She places the bundle of deep red thread in my arms, leaving me at a loss for words.

If she's giving me all of the raw materials, then we're *really* overcharging her! What should I do now?!

Although, I can't really say anything like "since the price Benno quoted included sourcing the raw materials, I'll give you a discount." The relationship between Benno and the guild leader he's overcharging is complicated enough, which is troubling. Plus, in my head, I can hear him admonishing me, saying "whenever and wherever you can take money, just *take* it, it's something to be taken."

Groaning softly to myself, I take another look at Freida's hairstyle.

"How were you planning on styling your hair on the day of the ceremony?" I ask.
"Just like it is now, I think…?"

Since Freida has her hair in pigtails, she'll need two hairpins. I'm glad I thought to ask. Better yet, I'm glad I stopped the guild leader from being too rash. If I'd done as he'd asked, not only would the hairpin not suit her, but she'd only have a pin for one side of her hair, which would have been problematic indeed.

"…If you'll be wearing it like you are today, you'll need two hairpins, won't you?"
"…Ah. You're right."

Freida seems just as taken aback as I am. I'm slightly relieved though; if I have to make two hairpins, then this will be somewhat less of a huge rip-off. Freida thoughtfully taps on her chin, a slightly serious expression on her face.

"I'm going to have to pay double for this, I think."
"No, no, since you've given me the thread I'll need for the materials, the existing payment is very much fine with me."

Since the production cost has been driven down to basically nothing, there is literally no way I could possibly accept *double* the excessive amount that we're already charging. The thought of it hurts my stomach.

"No, but you can't possibly say that," she replies. "You agreed to make one hairpin for that amount of money. If you make two, then I'll pay you for two."
"I couldn't! You're providing the raw materials, so for two…"

As Freida and I start to endlessly dither back and forth, with her insisting she'll pay and me insisting she doesn't have to, Lutz, who has been quiet this whole time, suddenly reaches up to noisily scratch his head.

"So," he proposes, "how about charging half-price for the second one?"
"Huh?"
"Maine, since you got the materials, you want to give a discount. Freida, since you don't want to cause any trouble between Benno and the guild leader, you want to pay full price for two. How about you meet in the middle, and pay half?"
"Lutz, you're a genius!" I exclaim. "Freida, how does that sound?"

I jump on Lutz's proposed compromise, to which I can't find any objections. I eagerly turn to look at Freida, but her incomprehensible expression doesn't seem to tell me that she's satisfied with that.

“I’m… fine with that, I guess, but… whenever and wherever you can earn money, you should take it, right? It’s something that’s there to be taken.”

This girl has just spouted words that do not at all match her sweet and adorable appearance. Freida is, without a doubt, a merchant’s daughter, and the grandchild of the guild leader.

“…Is that a merchant’s wisdom?” I ask. “Benno said the same thing…”
“Hm?” she says, looking slightly doubtful. “Isn’t that just how commerce works?”

Although she talks as if she’s saying the most obvious thing in the world, I can’t help but shake my head.

“There are limits to that, like, there are fair prices for things, and… ah, well, I’m just happy we found a compromise.”
“The two are pretty unusual!” she says, smiling slightly. This, however, is no hidden sneer, but a friendly, genuine smile.

We certainly haven’t formed a bond through resolving this disagreement, but I think we’ve worked a little bit to clear the space between us. It feels like there’s a little bit of solidarity, here.

This wasn’t exactly a negotiation to be proud of, but all of the details of the hairpins have been worked out. I’d thought that we’d immediately head home after that, but by now refills for our colde juice have arrived, and Lutz’s eyes, which had been full of silent desire to immediately leave, are now firmly glued to his cup. I myself also want to stay a little while long and savor this sweet flavor, so we spend a bit of time chatting idly.

“Ah, so you go to the forest to pick fruits and gather firewood. That sounds like you’re going on a picnic every day!”

Gathering firewood is pretty essential to maintaining our lifestyles, so it’s actually not as leisurely of an activity as she’s making it out to be. Rather, I’m actually more interested in how Freida lives, since she has no need to go out to the forest in order to forage for firewood.

“Freida, what do you usually do during the day? Kids in this part of the town don’t go to the forest, do they?”

“Oh, what I like to do is… heh heh…"

In a single beat, Freida starts smiling broadly.

"Counting money, I’d say?”

Huh? Did I mishear? Was that my imagination? Did my ears go funny for a second? I can’t imagine that a thought like that would have come out of this sweet, adorable little girl’s mouth.

“Ah, that’s not quite right. My apologies.”

I’m taken aback by that unexpectedly strange answer, but Freida gently shakes her head and moves to revise her earlier statement. She just misspoke, it seems, I think to myself, putting a relieved hand on my chest. But only for a moment.

“It’s not just counting it, I like *saving* it. Feeling the heavy weight of a sack full of gold is so delightful, and hearing coins clink against each other is the most wonderful thing! Don’t you agree?”
“…Ah… yes… that might be right. I also like it when my savings box starts to get heavy.”

After squeezing those words out, I quietly close my eyes.

…That wasn’t a hallucination. *Now* who’s making stuff up about her hobbies? Me! I am! I’m an enormous idiot! She’s the kind of girl who looks like she should be into making candy or embroidering things, so for her hobby to be *money*… I hadn’t even the slightest clue.

“Ah! You know what I mean?!”

Perhaps because someone agreed with her opinion, or perhaps because she just loves money that much, she starts getting fired up.

“So, when I was very young, the thing I loved the most was the glittering of gold coins, so when my grandfather did his monthly accounting, I sat with him, and I really enjoyed helping him count his gold.”

Did she just skip entirely over copper and silver, and go straight to gold? This damn rich girl!

Even as I grow increasingly envious, Freida keeps passionately rambling on. She gets entranced by gold, she says excitedly, to the point that her eyes grow foggy and her cheeks grow hot, etc., etc., and she things that financial calculations and growing a business looks very fun.

"And, lately, I've been thinking about what I can do to start making *more* money, so when I find new products that I might be able to sell my heart starts jumping with joy!"

…What do I do? This girl is *strange*. She's cute, but *far* too unfortunate.

"Hey, Maine."
"Y-yes, what is it?"

By this point, about half of my consciousness has wandered entirely elsewhere, so when she addresses I suddenly sit straight back up, snapping back to attention. Freida's eyes are glittering brightly, and at the same time she grabs my hands tightly.

"I'm really pleased with you, you know."
"Thank you very much?"

My voice unconsciously pitches unnaturally up at the end of my statement. I have no clue whatsoever about why she could possibly be pleased with me. As I tilt my head doubtfully to the side, Freida draws unabashedly close, a blush crossing her adorably sweet face as she continues to speak.

"Maine, do you want to work with me?"
"She can't!" replies Lutz immediately, before I can even react.

"Oh my! Well, my family's shop is much larger than Benno's, and we've been selling things for a lot longer than he has, so this is a good deal for her, isn't it? So, since there's no way you're officially employed as apprentices since you still haven't been baptized yet, so she can still come do her apprenticeship at my family's shop! Also, I'm asking *Maine*. That question wasn't directed at you at *all*."

Huh? Didn't something like this happen… yesterday…?

"I'm thankful for the offer," I say, "but I owe a lot to Mister Benno…"

Before I can finish my sentence with “so I must refuse”, Freida suddenly smiles even more widely, interrupting me.

“Aha! If that’s the case, then I’ll pay him back for you.”
“Um?! W, well…”

I’m trying to refuse, but she’s not letting me. Those *weren’t* just rumors. Benno wasn’t just overexaggerating his fears.

She is *exactly like* the guild leader! Her manner of speaking might be a little different, but she is saying the exact same things!

Her smile not fading in the slightest, she starts rambling off all of the benefits of working at her family’s shop. Lutz is suddenly looking very unhappy.

“Maine, answer her clearly, like you did yesterday.”
“I, I, I must refuse!!”

Ordinarily, I’d think that being rejected so clearly would cause a child to start crying, but Freida’s eyes merely go wide for a brief moment. Then, her fighting spirit reignites, and her eyes gleam brightly again.

“Well then, that’s a shame. …But! There’s still some time before your baptismal ceremony, Maine, and since you’re temporarily registered with the Merchant’s Guild already, I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities for me to run into you until then. Heh heh heh, I’m looking forward to this!”

What now? I feel like I’m a rat cornered by a snake, with no place to escape, and a cold sweat breaks out over my forehead.

Benno! I don’t care how much you overcharge anymore, just please, save meee!

Chapter 40
Freida's Hairpins

Lutz and I leave Freida's house, commencing our journey home. She just saw us off with a smile, but why do I feel like I'm fleeing for my life? All we did was eat sweets and chat a little, but why am I more exhausted than when I go to the forest?

"Ah, have you finished your negotitions?"
"Mister Mark?"

As we pass Benno's shop on our way home, Mark calls out to us. We'd previously been told that we should come by the shop tomorrow afternoon to deliver our report, so we were planning on heading home for the day, but Mark waves to us, smilingly beckoning us inside.

"I know that we had planned to discuss this tomorrow," he says, "but since Master Benno is rather nervous at the moment, would you perhaps be willing to discuss the outcome of today's negotiations right now?"
"…Yes, I would."

My stomach churns a little as I think about how much I might get scolded for arbitrarily charging half price for a second pin, but I do really want to finish this as quickly as possible.

"Master Benno," says Mark, opening the door. "May Maine and Lutz enter?"
"Yeah, show them in."

Benno sits behind his desk, tapping his finger impatiently on its surface as if to tell us to get in there immediately.

"…Maine, what'd you think? Of that old man's granddaughter."
"Ummm, she seemed like very cute young lady, like the rumors said."
"Alright, so she's well-groomed. What did you *think*?"

I tried hard to be politely indirect about my description, but Benno waves his hand dismissively, telling me to get to the heart of the matter.

“To be honest,” I reply, “her appearance and her personality are so different that I was a little shocked. She’s not just a girl who loves money, though; she’s been close to the guild leader, observing him, since well before her baptism. She’s thinking about how to grow her capital, how to expand her business ventures, and so on. I think she has amazing talent for being a merchant.”
“*You* think she’s amazing, hmm…”

Benno roughly scratches his head, then breathes a heavy sigh.

“Umm,” I say, “how should I put this… she’s cute, but very… strange. Right, Lutz?”

When I cram all those thoughts about my impression of her into that one sentence, Lutz raises his eyebrows, then looks down at me with a face that screams “like you’re one to talk.” Benno, looking very interested, quirks up the edges of his mouth, then asks Lutz the same question.

“Lutz, what did you think?”
“She tried to recruit Maine just like the guild leader did yesterday, so I think that she’s not someone you can let your guard down around. Also, I think that… she’s kinda like Maine.”
“Whaaat?! How?!”

That’s way too unthinkable!

As I practically lunge forward, demanding an explanation for his shocking words, Lutz merely shrugs his shoulders.

“When that girl talked about money,” he says, “she looked like you do when you’re talking about books. Both of you act like you don’t have eyes for anything other than the thing you like, so it’s just like you said earlier: cute face, but weird inside.”

Ah, I see. Right now, apparently, I look pretty cute.

There are no mirrors in my house, so I had tried to look at my reflection in a bucket of water, but all I could see was a warped, blurry shadow. The only people who have called me cute to my face were either people I’ve only just met or my excessively doting father, so I thought it was just polite flattery.

For as long as I can remember, I've been used to people calling me not just your average bookworm, but a *weirdo*. It doesn't really matter much to me, but I wasn't particularly cute at all. If you had looked at me, you'd have seen just the kind of nerdy girl who holed herself up in the library all the time. Nobody had ever said that I looked any different than they thought I should.

I imagine a girl who resembles her siblings, so one who looks like a younger version of Tory, who also chases after nonexistent books, so an eccentric, strangely-behaving one. As I think about that dramatic clash of images, I hang my head in defeat.

"…I'm sorry. I have something to think about now."
"Think long and hard about it."
"Ngh…" I say, depressed.

Benno, who has been watching our exchange with a smirk, starts tapping his finger on his desk again.

"Then what? Did you finish your negotiations?"
"Umm, Miss Freida wears her hair in two braids, so it turns out that I'll be making two hairpins."
"Hmm! So we'll make double the profit."

My heart skips a beat when he says that. There's no way I can't tell him about this, but if I tell him, he'll absolutely get mad at me.

"Well, umm, you see…"
"What?"

Benno stares pointedly at me with his reddish-brown eyes. My breath catches in my throat with a squeak, and I stammer, stalling for time, as I try to come up with some kind of explanations. Benno turns his sharp gaze from me to Lutz. The instant Benno opens his mouth, Lutz starts talking.

"Miss Freida provided Maine with the thread that she'll be using for the raw materials, so Maine said that she'd make the second one for no extra charge…"
"Lutz?!" I cry, panicked.
"What did you say?!" roars Benno, at the exact same instant.
"Miss Freida," continued Lutz, "insisted that the price had already been established, so she'd pay full price for the second one…"

"…Oh?"
"It didn't seem like they'd ever agree on anything, so I spoke up, and we came to an agreement that Miss Freida would pay half price for the second hairpin."

After Lutz delivers his precise, succinct report, Benno raises his eyebrows, then turns to look at me.

"Maine… are you an *idiot*? Have you heard a *word* I've said? Or did you just *forget* everything?"
"I… I remembered! So even when I got the materials, I didn't try to lower the price at all for the first one. But then, after we agreed on half-price for the second, Freida said 'whenever and wherever you can take money you should take it, because it's something that's there to be taken', like you do."
"The *person you were negotiating with* told you that?"

Benno rubs his forehead, an amazed look on his face, then shakes his head. Even I had thought it was kind of pitiful that my opponent would remind me of that, but the thought of overcharging her *that* much made my stomach churn.

"But I was thinking that maybe there's a limit to how much I should be profiting, or maybe I was way past asking for a fair price, so my stomach started hurting… please forgive me."
"What kind of merchant gets a stomachache when earning money? Seriously… Well, that's just money out of your pocket. I'm charging the same handling fee for both of them, so I don't care either way. If strange rumors start to spread about how you can get a second hairpin for free if you buy one, then you're definitely going to get pushy customers coming in to demand it. Make sure you pay attention to what customers you can afford to lose."

I hadn't realized that customers like that could possibly exist. I hang my head even lower, the awareness of my lack of basic knowledge being hammered like nails into my skull.

"Ngh, I hadn't thought that far ahead. I'm sorry. Then, here is the thread that Freida lent me to use as materials. I'm going to want some white thread that matches this one. I'm going to need, ummm…"

I pull the measuring tape out of my tote bag, then stretch it from fingertip to fingertip.

“About this long… I’ll need a piece that’s about 100 feli long, please.”
“Got it. Tomorrow, come back here so that you can go to the thread warehouse with Mark. While you’re at it, you should pick up the thread you’ll need for your winter work.”
“Yes, sir,” I reply.

After we’re told that it’s okay to leave, Lutz and I head out from Benno’s shop to return home. I suddenly sympathize dearly with all of the worn-out salarymen back home. I want to go home and be comforted.

“I’m home,” I say, as I walk through the door.
“Welcome back, Maine,” says Tory. “How was the girl you met today? Did you make friends?”

She, on cooking duty for today, looks up from the pot she’s stirring and smiles at me. She has a cute face, she’s very helpful, she’s kind, she’s been getting better at cooking so she’s a (future) excellent cook, and since she’s working as a seamstress she’s a (future) sewing beauty. When I see her, emotion suddenly wells up in my heart.

“Toryyy~!” I cry, running up and clinging to her tightly.

She looks down at me, frowning a little. “What’s wrong, Maine, did something happen?”
“Tory, you’re an angel! You heal me. You’re the best older sister in the world, but I’m not even just sick and useless all the time. Lutz told me today that I’m way weirder than I look, so I only just noticed. I’m so sorry, Tory!”
“Hah…” she sighs, stroking my head. “You just noticed?”

After a little while, she points over to the bedroom. “Maine, I can’t cook like this. Go put your stuff away, okay?”
“Okay!”

I put my tote bag away, then come back to help Tory in the kitchen. Even though people keep saying over and over that I’m so small, I *have* grown a little bit, so now I can actually stir a pot safely, if I’m standing on a chair.

While I carefully stir the pot so that nothing burns, I tell Tory all about my day.

“Okay, so, the girl I met is called Freida, and she’s really cute, but her hobby is *money*. She said her favorite thing to do is count gold coins.”
“*Gold coins*?! I haven’t even seen those! She must be super rich to have enough of those to count.”

Tory seems to have jumped straight to the quantity of gold coins, missing Freida’s weird interests entirely. Around here, I think it might not be uncommon for someone to spend their entire life without seeing a single gold coin, so I know just how big of an impact that might have.

“Her house is amazing too. There’s decorations and cloth everywhere, and it’s very pretty. Oh! And then Freida told me that the sickness I have is called the devouring.”
“…Huh, I’ve never heard of that.”

Tory tilts her head to the side doubtfully when she hears about that previously-unknown disease. It can’t be helped; it seems like there’s very few people who actually know about it, after all.

“It’s a really rare disease. Mister Otto and Mister Benno even said that they didn’t know about it. She knew about it because she used to have it too! But she also said that it took a *lot* of money to cure her. And if a girl that rich says that it took a lot of money…”
“…then there’s no way we can afford it.”

Tory immediately comes to the same conclusion that I had. She didn’t even need to think about it. With our economic status, where we can’t even call a doctor when someone collapses with a fever, there’s no way we can make that happen, no matter what we do.

“…Yeah. But she told me about what I can do to make sure it doesn’t get any worse!”
“Oh?”
“If I have a goal or a target in mind, and I’m always working really hard on making it there, then I’ll be fine, she says.”
“Ah! That makes sense. You’ve been kinda doing whatever you like lately, so you’ve been much healthier. Before, you always used to cry about how only I could do things that I liked…”
“Ooh…”

Now that she mentions it, Maine's memories are full of times when she was feverish, crying a lot, and bothering Tory. Now that she's made that comparison to the past out loud, though, I think she *had* to have noticed something strange had happened, right?

As I start to brood, Tory hurriedly comes over to stroke my hair comfortingly.

"Don't feel bad. I think it's great that you're feeling so much better. So! How about the hairpin?"
"I asked her about what her favorite color was, and she gave me some of the thread that her dress is embroidered with. I'm going make the pins out of it. And since she has her hair in two braids, she needs two pins."
"Hmm, I see!"

Our mother returns home while we're still in the middle of our preparations, and after a little while our father, who has recently been stuck only on night shifts and thus I haven't seen very much, returns from his first day shift in a while. While we eat the first dinner in a while that we've had the whole family together for, we talk a lot about the guild leader's home. It's not at all common for someone like us to be able to visit the home of someone so rich, so everyone at the table was extremely interested in hearing all about it.

My mother seemed most interested in hearing about all of the decorative tapestries and cushions they had, and my father was more interested in the brands of liquor they had lined up on the shelves. Tory was curious about the things that Freida wore and the kinds of things she owned, so her questions were all about Freida's belongings.

After a much more exciting dinner than I thought we'd have, I pull my mother aside and ask her if she could give back my embroidery needles.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.
"I'm going to make some hairpins. I told you yesterday, right? They're what Freida wants me to make. Today I went to find out exactly what she wanted to order. I also told her that I wanted to make it out of the same thread that her dress was embroidered with, so she lent me some."
"Could you show me that thread, please?"

My mother, the skilled seamstress who works as a dyer, could not, of course, hide her great interest in the thread I'd brought home from Freida. She tells me that she'll get

her sewing kit and take out the embroidery needles, so I should immediately go and fetch the thread.

I pull the thread out of my tote bag. The instant I set it on the table, my mother picks it up, staring at it very closely. Tory, who is apprenticing as a seamstress, is also interested in the kind of thread that the daughter of a rich family has embroidered on her dresses, so she excitedly comes in to sneak a peek.

“Dying a thread this deeply red takes a lot of work, you know.”
“It really is a high quality thread!”

While the two of them are entranced by the bundle of thread they hold, I sit down at the table in front of them and get my embroidering needles ready.

“Since hairpins like this are super rare, we’re going to sell it at a really high price. So, I’m going to try my hardest on this!”
“Is it going to be like mine?” asks Tory.

When I was making Tory’s pin, my first priority had been making economical use of the thread we had, so I was only really able to make it out of tiny flowers made out of the colors of thread we had left over. This time, though, I have quite a lot of the red thread that Freida lent me. Also, since we’re charging as much as we are, I’m going to try to make it somewhat more elaborate than Tory’s. For me, I need to put in a good faith effort.

“The flowers are going to be bigger,” I say. “since I’ve got so much more thread.”

My mental image is a bouquet, with a ring of miniature red roses set against green grasses. If I’m talking about a rich girl, the only thing my terrible imagination can come up with is, regrettably, roses. Roses, however, are very gorgeous flowers, and it’ll be a very showy piece.

I knit together a jagged strip of lace, designed so that it’ll form into petals once it’s rolled up. When I decided it was long enough, I roll it up, stitch it shut along the bottom, then spread the petals out a little bit, turning it into a small rose.

“Whoa, cute!”

Happy because Tory praised me, I immediately get started on the second flower. My dad, drinking some liquor, looks over to see what's happening, then turns to my mother, who's been watching me this whole time and acting like she's itching to jump in.

"Say, Eva. If you're so interested in doing that, would you like me to make you another set of needles?"
"Dad," says Tory, "I want some too, so make two sets please!"

Emboldened by my mother's grateful embrace and Tory's begging, my father, in high spirits, gets some wood and starts whittling. Since he's already made a set of these for me, it takes him a relatively short amount of time to craft each slender needle.

Tory grabs the first completed set, then starts knitting along with me. Since she's been going to apprentice as a seamstress, it seems like her skills have been leveling up; after thinking about it for a few moments, she starts knitting fluidly. To be honest, she's faster than I am.

My mother has been hungrily watching me work, so when she receives her freshly-made needles she smiles brilliantly at my father, then tears into the work with a fierceness I never thought was possible.

"Maine," says my father, "do you want your Daddy to make the pin part for you?" says my father eagerly.

His hands are idle, now that he's finished carving the needles. I feel bad for him, because he just wants to help his daughter with her work, but that part is Lutz's job. If it were to be taken away from him, then since we'd no longer be making it together, there'd no longer be any justification for him having come along with me to Freida's place and intruding on our meeting. Also, Lutz isn't the kind of person who would accept money for doing nothing, so if he doesn't actually help make the pins, despite the fact that he's always been there with me as I go around, he'll be the only one who doesn't make any money from this.

"You can be emotional support! Carving is Lutz's job, please don't take it from him."
"It's always Lutz, Lutz, Lutz. Maine, why are being so cold to your Daddy lately?"

My father, ever easy to read, sulks. He has way too much love for his family, so he gets strangely jealous about Otto and Lutz, to the point where sometimes it just gets *annoying*. I breathe a sigh, then shake my head.

"If you want to make a hairpin, why don't you not make pins for the other kids, but make one for my baptism? I'm planning on wearing a hairpin, so I kind of want something like before, with a hole in it…"
"Oho, what's this, Maine? You don't want me to make them for the other kids, because you'd get jealous?"

Wrong. I have no idea where you could have possibly gotten that impression.

My father smiles broadly, due to whatever bizarre thoughts are bouncing around in his head, and starts working on making my hairpin. Since his mood is instantly good again, I shift my focus back to my needles. While I was busy talking to him, Tory and my mother have raced way ahead of me.

"I think we should be good on the red flowers now. Let's finish up the ones that we're doing now."

I needed to make several roses like the first, but with three people working on it, it's done in a flash. My mother is particularly fast. I, the one who is actually being paid to do this, am the by far the slowest.

"Whaaat? Done already?"

Tory pouts in dissatisfaction, perhaps because she found the knitting far more enjoyable than expected, but I merely shrug my shoulders as I finish forming the last of the roses into shape. Originally, my plan had been to have the left and right hairpins each have three miniature roses, but by the time I noticed how quickly they were getting made we had enough for four on each side. Given the size of each of them, we really don't need any more than this.

"It wouldn't be right for us to waste any of the thread that someone else lent to us, right?"
"Ah, that's right. We shouldn't use such a pretty thread on something useless."

Downhearted, Tory quietly agrees, then starts putting away her needles.

“The next step is to make a lot of little flowers out of the white thread that I’ve asked Mister Benno for. I think white thread would match this red very well, so I think it would be a good thread to use. When I bring it back with me tomorrow, Tory, if it’s okay with you, you can help me with the white flowers too.”
“Sounds like fun!”

Tory smiles happily as she picks up her sewing box.

…Hmmm, if Tory’s like this, I wonder if it would be okay for her to skip making baskets for her winter work and help me make hair ornaments instead?

The next day, Mark, Lutz, and I head out to the thread warehouse so that we can stock up on supplies. It’s the same shop that the craftsman we hired to make the paper mat took us to previously. The shopkeeper immediately stands up when he sees us, perhaps because we’d made such a big impression last time after buying the highest-quality spinne silk from him.

“Ah, if it isn’t the folks who bought spinne silk a while ago! Are you here to buy some more?”
“Yes,” replies Mark, “we’ll be coming back another day with our craftsman to make another purchase. Today, though, we’re here to inquire about a different kind of thread.”

Mark’s words remind me of what Benno said earlier, that he’d have the craftsman make another paper mat for us by springtime. My head has lately been full of thoughts about Freida’s hairpins and my winter handiwork, but I can’t let myself forget about any of the preparations that need to be done in order for us to make paper come spring.

…I want a notebook. I don’t want this slate, which gets erased whenever anything gets rubbed against it. I really want a notebook.

“What can I help you with today?”
“Umm,” I say, “I’m looking for a white thread that would match this one.”

I pull Freida’s thread from my tote bag and hand it to the shopkeeper. He stares at it closely, then hums thoughtfully.

“This is a very high-quality thread. What I’ve got that wouldn’t strange next to it would be… these ones.”

He pulls out two kinds of thread and sets them down in front of me, then places the red thread next to them. After I spend some time looking back and forth between them to compare, I pick up the one that makes the red pop out a little more, then hand it to the shopkeeper.

“Could I please get 100 feli of this thread, and 100 feli of that green you have there. Also, I’d like many different colors of the cheapest thread you have. I’d like 200 feli of each of those, please.”

I need to separate the thread for Freida’s hairpins and the thread for my winter handiwork into two separate orders. I take out the order form set (the blank wooden order forms, the tape measure, the ink, and a wooden pen) that I always keep in my totebag. When I’ve finished describing the orders to the shopkeeper, I write them out immediately, my wooden pen clacking against the wood of the order forms.

A lot of the cheaper threads don’t have particularly good coloring, but for only two large copper coins I can’t really make a huge fuss about it. These hairpins aren’t things that’ll be worn in everyday life, just for formal events. If the price is high enough that people would regret purchasing it for just a single occasion, the few people will buy it. I can’t let myself set my expectations by the six small silver coins the guild leader will pay for his granddaughter’s two pins.

“These threads for your winter work will take some time for me to prepare, so how about I deliver these to your shop once I’m done with them?”
“Yes, please do.”

I put the high-quality white thread that I’ll be immediately using in my tote bag, then head out of the shop. Since the thread warehouse is close to Lutz and my houses, we split off from Mark in front of the thread warehouse and head back home. As we head home, I tell Lutz about how we were already able to finish the red part of the pins last night, and his eyes go wide.

“Huh? Then, you’re already ready to finish off the pins? Didn’t you say that we had some time left, so you’d take your time on it?”

“Yeah, I think it’ll be ready tomorrow or the day after. Mommy and Tory really want to help, and they’re way better and faster than me, so they did it in no time at all. If it were just me, it would have taken a lot longer.”

My initial estimate of seven to ten days was based on me having to go to either the forest or the shop during the day, and working on the hairpins between dinner and bedtime. I hadn’t even considered the possibility that I might somehow finish everything off in just a single day.

“Got it. I’ll get started on my pin part immediately.”
“Yes, please! My dad really wants to join in and help make it, so…”
“Man, seriously…”

Lutz, seeing his work being almost stolen from him, hangs his head, sighing.

“Although… I’ve been thinking about what we’d do if my family takes all the work from us, but that’s not quite right, is it? Merchants are people who let other people do the work making things so that they can buy and sell them. Mister Benno doesn’t make anything himself, but he’s still earning a commission off of the things we’re making, right?”
“Huh. You’re right.”

Lutz looks up at me, taken aback. It is *not* the case that we can’t earn any money if we don’t actually make anything. Merchants are people who can bring forth money by just moving goods from one place to another. We’re still thinking too much like craftsmen.

“This time, we already told the guild leader and Mister Benno that we were going to be making these pins together, so even though it’s going to be difficult to change how we think so quickly, the two of us need to study really hard together how to work like a merchant.”
“Yeah!”

When I bring the thread home, the work that I had originally planned on doing was, just as I thought, snatched away from me by Tory and my mother.

In the time it took me to make a single small flower, Tory made two, and my mother made four. In the blink of an eye, we were finished. Next, I was got ready to start

making little leaf decorations out of the green thread, but the two of them wound up making the vast majority of them. Once again, I find myself pretty damn useless.

…Conclusion: It is impossible for me to become a sewing beauty. Opening my path towards being a merchant's apprentice was definitely the correct one.

Chapter 41
Hairpin Delivery

Once I finish attaching the pin parts of the hairpins that Lutz made to the parts that I had made, I can't help but breathe a little sigh of self-satisfaction at our accomplishment. The hairpins we made for Freida came out absolutely gorgeous, far more than I was expecting. Each one has four miniature red roses arranged on it, surrounded by a spray of tiny flowers, styled in the image of baby's-breath, with the shape of green leaves poking out here and there from behind.

"…Hey, Maine," says Lutz, his face twitching as he sees the pin. "Isn't this *way* different from Tory's hairpin? This is *super* pretty."

The reasons are simple. First, we used a thread of much higher quality. Since the flower are made from a thinner, smoother thread, they are much finer and glossier. Secondly, the level of skill that went into them is very different. Unlike Tory's hairpin, where the vast majority of the flowers were made by my pin, about eighty percent of the flowers on Freida's hairpins were made by my mother and Tory, so they're much more detailed and elaborate.

"When you think about what her dress is made of and her general atmosphere, don't you think that this suits her a lot better than Tory's would?"
"I have *zero* idea what you mean when you keep asking if something suits or doesn't suit someone," he says, shaking his head.

I cross my arms, deep in thought. "Hmmm," I say, "that's something you're going to need to learn too, since it looks like Mister Benno is starting to carry a lot more things that are marketed to the nobility."

Lutz lets his eyes wander off to the distance, perhaps because he doesn't really want to look at something he's bad at.

"Heyyy, Maine. Now that we're done, what do we do?"
"I think that we should show it to Mister Benno first, and then deliver it to the guild leader. How about we try heading to Mister Benno's shop now?"
"Sounds good."

The finished hairpins have been placed in a small box, the top of which is covered by the nicest handkerchief in my house so that nobody can see what's inside.

"Maine, you hold the box. I'll carry that bag for you."

With my slate, slate pencils, and ordering set in my tote bag, it's gotten reasonably heavy, by my standards. Grateful, I quietly hand it over to Lutz, and receive the small box in exchange.

"Ah," says Mark when he sees us arrive, "what brings the two of you here today?"

"We've completed the hairpins. I thought that it would be a good idea if, before we delivered it to the guild leader, we showed it to Mister Benno first, maybe…"
"Oh? Show me," says Benno, unexpectedly, from right behind me. Startled, I jump slightly in place.

When I turn around, I see that he's standing behind me, dressed impeccably in magnificent clothes, perhaps having just come back from visiting the nobility.

"Welcome back, Master Benno," says Mark.
"Hey," he replies, nodding. He looks down at me and Lutz. "…Come along, you two."

We follow him as he heads into his room, deeper in the shop.

"So, then," he says as he sits down at the table, "where are these completed hairpins?"

I hold out the small box for Benno to see, removing the handkerchief that covers it.

"What do you think about pins like this?"

"…Maine, you… did *not* need to charge half price for the second one of these."
"Um? I still think that we're massively overcharging even after that… since the only real materials cost is the thread, we're making about three small silver coins worth of profit, right?"
"You're going to have to learn how much things are *worth*. Every single thing you've brought to me has been a luxury good. If you don't know how to correctly price high-quality luxury items like these, you'll throw the market into absolute chaos."
"…I'm sorry."

I'm well aware of how my own intuition does not mesh at all with how goods are priced in this world, so I can very much appreciate how Benno has had to become a breakwater against the tide of chaos I might bring to the town's market. I already knew that clothing and decoration were high-priced goods, but since I don't have the strength to walk around the town from store to store to do any research, I don't have a sense for what kinds and qualities of things are being sold for what prices. On top of that, given my age and my bearing, I'd likely be refused entry to any shops that dealt in those kinds of high-priced goods.

…Even still, luxury goods, huh? Simple shampoo, paper, and hairpins all used to be obvious stuff I'd find all around me, after all.

I know, in my head, that the Middle Ages I read about in my books didn't have any of these things, but in my heart I still don't accept it. If something doesn't exist, I keep searching for ways that I could find some sort of substitute or make it for myself.

"Mister Benno," I say, "I'd like to deliver this to the guild leader; what would be the best way to do so? I think I'd like to make an appointment to meet with him."
"Good idea. Now's a good time, how about I show you how to do that?"

He takes out an ordering set, writes out a request to meet with the guild leader, then fills in our names and the purpose for the meeting.

"Now you can deliver this to the third floor of the guild. When they decide on a time for the appointment, a staff member will fill in the details here, then deliver it back to the shop."
"So, should we deliver it on our way home?"
"…Ahhh, wait. If it's just the two of you, you'll be easy prey in that place. I'll come along too."

He might be exaggerating the danger of just delivering a meeting request, I think.

We go to the merchant's guild and ascend to the third floor, Lutz and I using our own cards this time. After delivering the request card to the service counter, Lutz and I turn to head home, happy about a job well done, when the receptionist calls out to us.

"Please wait one moment."
"Um?!"

“I’ve been instructed that, if two people named Maine and Lutz were to arrive, that I show them in immediately.”

Sure enough, we’re being let through. As I stumble about in flustered confusion, Benno glances down at me and murmurs, “do you see now?”

Whoa, Mister Benno, you were absolutely correct! I’m so glad he came along with us.

The guild leader shows us in when we arrive at his office, although his expression is a little less than agreeable when Benno comes in along with us.

“What can I do for you today?”
“We’ve finished the hairpins, and have brought them here for you.”
“Well then, let’s take a look, shall we?”

I take out the small box I brought with me, remove the handkerchief, and hold it out, as far as I can, towards the guild leader. Since Benno has already given his OK, I *think* everything will be fine, but I still can’t stop my heart from pounding.

The guild leader peers into the box, then picks out one of the hairpins. He frowns as he inspects it closely, then looks over at me, eyebrows raised.

“…This is very different than the one you showed me last time, is it not?”
“I took extra care to ensure that the product was worth the price you were paying for it. Was the item you saw previously perhaps more to your liking? I had thought to make hairpins that would fit Miss Freida’s hairstyle and clothing better, after speaking with her, but…”

As my face goes pale, wondering if he’s unhappy with it, the guild leader hurriedly shakes his head.

“No, no, I’m merely surprised; I hadn’t expected such an excellent product. I think they really will suit Freida quite well.”
“Ah, really? That’s good to hear.”

As I reassure myself that there’s no way he could possibly reject it, the guild leader’s eyes suddenly gleam.

“Maine, wouldn’t you like to work at m…”

“Maine, it looks like we’re done here. We’re leaving.”

Before the guild leader could even finish his sentence, Benno seizes Lutz’s and my arms and stands up. I contemplate if it’s best for us to leave now, since our business here is done, and quietly follow along behind him. Frantically, the guild leader blocks our path.

“No, wait. Now that this is finally ready, I’d like you to deliver it to Freida yourself. I’m so happy that she’s made friends with another girl. When I hear that she made a friend the same age as her, I was overjoyed!”

Oh ho, Freida’s made a friend? What a joyous occasion!

As I so carefreely contemplate somebody else’s problems, Benno, having heard how moved the guild leader sounds, leans down next to me and whispers quietly in my ear.

“You’ve… become her *friend*?”
“Um! Me?! …Ummm, I, I wonder?”

I knew that she had been quite pleased with me, although it was rather one-sided, but I wouldn’t really call this a friendship. However, it would be very difficult for me to deny it out loud in front of the guild leader, who is so obviously overjoyed that his granddaughter has made a friend.

“I hear that she’ll be having sweets ready so that you can come over to play any time you’d like.”
“…Sweets?”

Benno flicks my forehead for letting that reaction slip. I know that I shouldn’t be showing any weakness, but I couldn’t stop my self as soon as the topic of sweet things came up.

“Good! How about I take you to her right now?”

The guild leader picks me up effortlessly, perhaps like he may have picked up Freida before, and brings me out of the room. Benno and Lutz stare, wide-eyed, as I’m abducted literally right from in front of them, then frantically chase after us.

“Hey, wait,” says Benno. “I’m coming with you.”

“Where Maine goes, I go!” says Lutz.

It seems that it’s already been decided that we’re going, but the guild leader’s house is close to the castle walls, even further from my house than Benno’s shop is. To be perfectly honest, if I go, I don’t think I would have enough energy for me to return home.

“…Sir,” I say, “I’m not very strong at all, and I don’t think I can walk any farther today.”
“There’s no real need to walk. We’ll be taking my carriage.”
“Carriage?!”

I hadn’t really thought of those as something I could ride on. I’ve seen traders and farmers using wagons and carts, of both the horse- and hand-drawn varieties, along the main streets, but in my sphere of existence, each family is likely to have just one hand-drawn cart, and only adults are able to use them.

This goes without saying, but things like rubber tires do not exist here, so when a cart is loaded with baggage, even an adult has to put quite a lot of effort into pulling it. It’s not at all the kind of thing that a child could use. On top of that, a child would most certainly not be allowed to use such an important item of which the family only has one. We must use our own two feet to get around. That’s that.

Even more, horses are expensive. Donkeys are comparatively omnivorous, but since the hay that horses eat is expensive, even the maintenance costs are unattainably exorbitant.

Tch. *Rich people.*

As I stew in my envy of the guild leader’s wealthy status, he brings me down to the first floor of the Merchant’s Guild building, and puts me up into his carriage. Lutz and Benno, having come to their senses, catch up to us, getting onto the carriage as well, and all four of us get ready to depart, heading towards Freida’s place to make the delivery.

This is my first time in a horse-drawn carriage.

I’ve been on a hand-drawn cart before, during last year’s winter preparations, but this is my first time riding something that’s pulled by an animal. Lutz and I look around constantly, and the guild leader smiles wryly at us.

“Heh. Maine, is this your first time riding a carriage?”
“I’ve seen them going through the gates and driving on the roads, but neither Lutz nor I have anyone in our families that own one.”

This is a vehicle that was intended to pull two adults, so it’s rather crowded. The two adults fit exactly on the seats, so Lutz and I are stuck, with apologies, on our butts on the shelf in the back, where luggage is supposed to go. Since we’re children, we’re somehow able to fit, but it’s rather dangerous.

“…It’s cramped in here. Benno, get out.”
“If I do, Maine comes with me.”

Benno and the guild leader glare at each other for a little while, but eventually, the carriage starts slowly moving forward.

“Whoaaoaooaaa!!”

The cart jostles violently as it moves, making it impossible for me to stay still on my seat. Lutz has found safety by clinging desperately to the railing that’s intended to help people get on and off, but I have nothing to grab onto. With every bump of the road, it seems like I’m about to fly entirely out of my seat.

“Maine, come here.”

Benno sits me on his lap, one arm around my stomach, pinning me tightly so that I won’t fly away. Even still, each shake of the cart sends me almost floating off my butt, and if I’m not careful, the top of my head might slam into Benno’s jaw. I knew that a cart without any suspension would be a bumpy ride, but I had no idea it was going to be this awful.

Horse-drawn carriages are not at *all* elegant vehicles.

“Freida,” calls the guild leader, “Maine’s brought your hair ornaments!”
“Well, Maine! Welcome.”

Her cherry-blossom hair swaying airly behind her, Freida greets us with a gentle smile on her face.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” I reply.
“Madam Freida, it is nice to meet you. My name is Benno. I’ve heard much about you from Maine.”
“Well, I wonder what kind of things she might have said?”

They’re so politely greeting each other, yet this sends shivers down my spine.

Lutz grabs my hand tightly, trembling as we listen to the two of them introduce themselves. I quickly glance over at him, and see that he’s gone pale. Neither of us are at all ready to join in the invisible battle between fellow merchants that’s happening right now. I wonder if the two of us will actually be able to someday send sparks flying with a smile like that?

“Freida,” says the guild leader. Please handle receiving the hairpins from those two and pay them what they’re owed.“
"Yes, grandfather.”

As the guild leader leads Benno to his own room, Freida leads Lutz and I to a similar sitting room as last time. Meanwhile, sweet drinks and sweet snacks have been brought out, and an entrancingly sweet smell drifts from the table.

“Girls love sweet things, so I have some prepared so that you can come by to play any time! Maine, whenever you’re free, please come to play.”
“Yes!” I answer, with a transcendent smile.

Lutz pinches my hand under the table.

Argh, that’s right. I cannot let myself succumb to sweet temptation. I mustn’t succumb, I mustn’t s… *sniff, sniff*, ah, bliss~!

Honey-soaked nuts have been layered on top of a thin pizza dough, baked, sliced, and set out for me.

“Come! Maine, Lutz, please enjoy!”
“Thank you!”

Nom, nom. The ample honey makes it deliciously sweet. What a luxurious confection. Is this heaven?

For a while, I just let myself eat my fill, recalling memories of nut tarts I had in Japan. Sweet things really do bring happiness.

"Thank you very much. It was quite delicious."
"I'm very happy you thought so. I'll be sure to convey that to the chef."

Wow, madam, you have a chef. So, she said she had prepared sweets for us, but her *chef* prepared them for us, and all she did was bring them out. What a stratified society.

"Now then," she says, "would you perhaps like to show me the hairpins, now?"
"Certainly. Ah, before that, let me return the remaining thread."
"…Oh my, you don't really need to."

No, no, I can't actually keep an expensive thread like this. When talking to the guild leader or to Freida, I know deep in my heart that there's nothing more terrifying than getting something for free. I can't accept things from them so freely. I can't give into temptation.

"Miss Freida, here are—"
"Maine, the two of us are friends! Please, just call me Freida."

When such a lovely, cute little girl says something like that with such a dazzling smile, there's no way I can just say "we aren't friends, though?". Flustered, I fumble about for a way out.

"Um? But, you're a customer…"
"Oh my. …Well, with this, I'm not anymore!"

Smiling broadly, Freida takes the box containing her hairpins from me, and in exchange, places a stack of six small silver coins in front of Lutz and I.

"I have received my order and paid the bill. Now there's nothing in the way of our friendship!"
"…Very well."

With all avenues of escape closed, and in a situation where I can't just say no, I defeatedly nod my head in acceptance. Depending on how you think about it, she's a friend whose appearance does not match her personality at all, so it won't be a problem if I'm a little weird myself. Let's take this as a good thing.

If she's fine with me just calling her "Freida", I wonder if I can speak a little more casually?

"Umm, then, Freida. Would you like to take a look at the hairpins?"
"Of course! Don't mind if I do."

Freida gently pinches the handkerchief between two fingers, then pulls it away. When she takes one of the hairpins out of the box, her eyes grow wide.

"Well! How magnificent! Since my baptism is in the winter, snow will have started falling by the time the ceremony comes around, so there won't be any flowers or berries to use as hair ornaments, you know? I've been *terribly* envious of the children whose ceremonies were in the spring and summer. In a season where all the plants are withered, being able to clad myself in brilliant flowers and green leaves makes me so happy!"
"I'm glad to hear that."

Now that I think of it, Tory had initially said that her hair decorations were going to be flowers that she could pick nearby. In that case, these hairpins should sell very well during the winter.

"Try putting them on," I say. "I want to see how they look in your hair."
"I don't quite know how to do that. Maine, might I trouble you to?"
"Sure! If you could give me those…"

I take the hairpins from her, then insert each of them into the base of her pigtails, where they're tied off with string. The small, deep red roses stand out beautifully against her light, cherry-blossom pink hair, further enhancing her general air of maturity.

Roses were definitely the right choice.

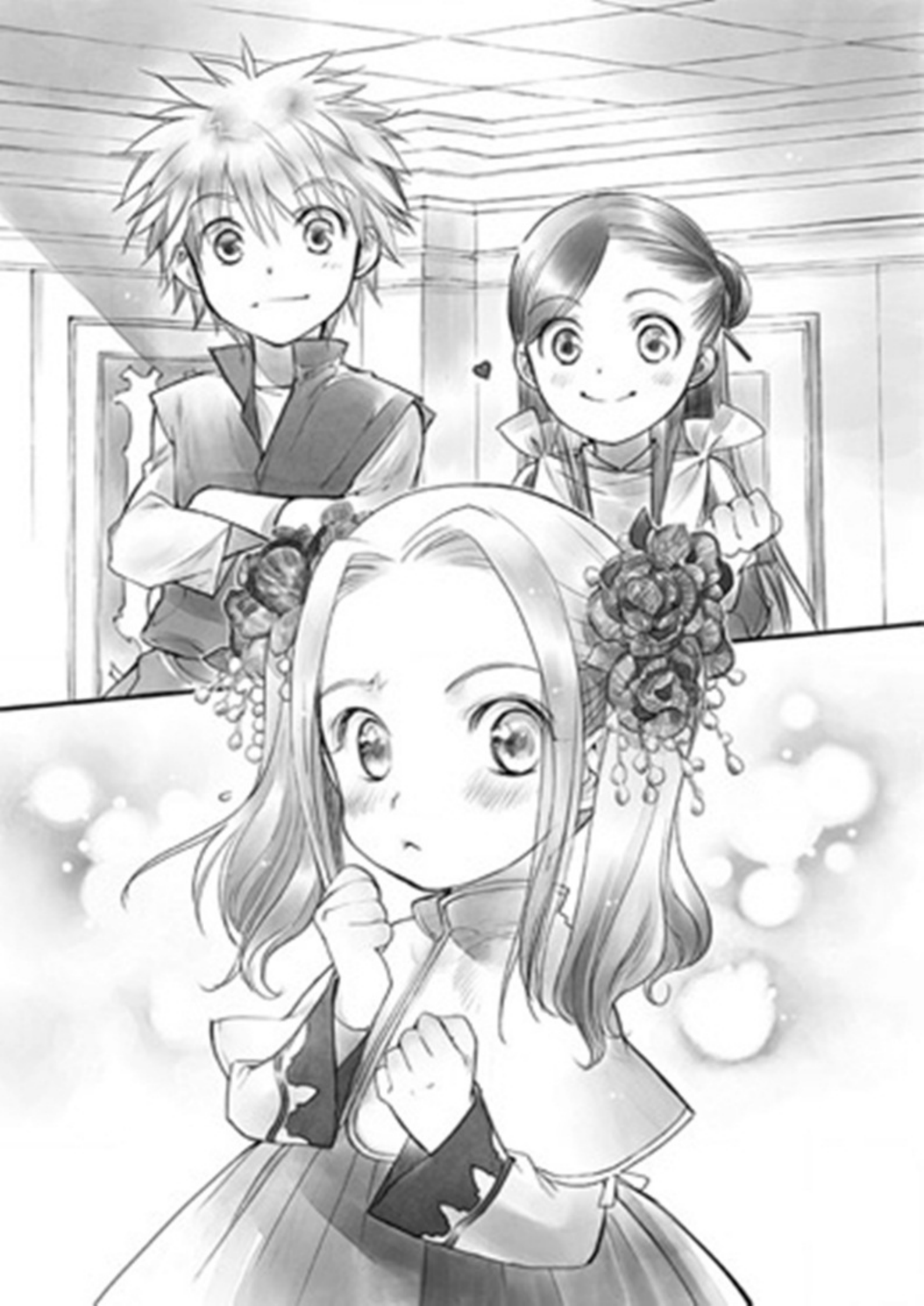
"You're very cute, Freida! Like a fairy of the flowers."

“You flatter me too much!” she says, daintily covering her mouth as she bashfully giggles. “You’re just like my grandfather.”

This isn’t flattery. If I didn’t know anything about her personality, she’d be the kind of little girl I’d want to kidnap and run away with.

“It’s not flattery! It’s a really cute look, and it suits you. Lutz, you think so too, right?”
“Yeah. When I was just looking at the pins, I didn’t think that they were going to fit you so well. Maine made these to just to match you. You’re *super* cute.”
“……”

Freida, whose face is growing red and whose cheeks are growing puffy, is clearly not used to being praised like this. I can instantly see from her reaction that she really doesn’t have any siblings or friends.



In this world, it's common for friends and family to be constantly praising each other. I've been extolling Tory's virtues, and she's been praising me in return. Lutz praises me whenever I do something, and I've started to grow accustomed to praising others as well. It was startling to me at first, to the point where I'd shy away from it, but lately I've been able to go along with this kind of constant lip service.

"Even so," she says, "to be able to build such solid shapes out of thread…"

Freida has extracted the hairpins from her head and has started studying them in careful detail, like Benno and the guild leader had done before. Her eyes have completely become like those of a merchant.

"It's not all that difficult," I say. "Even I can do it!"
"…The discovery of this construction method is a *very* big deal, Maine."
"Huh?"

Freida sighs lightly, then looks at me with a far more serious expression than I was expecting.

"The wives and daughters of the upper nobility are fond of wearing brightly-colored veils of unblemished embroidery. They also wear decorations made of real flowers that have been frozen in time via magic. However, nobody has any ornaments with shape like this."

The nobility who use ornaments like this use magic to do so, so perhaps decorations like this were never actually developed? As I hum thoughtfully to myself, Freida continues to explain the magnificence of these decorations.

"There is so much fabric in this house with so much embroidery, but not a single piece of it has this kind of shape. To be able to make a solid object with nothing but thread is completely groundbreaking!"

When she says it like that, I finally get it. This is why Benno said there was no need to sell the second pin at half price. This is, essentially, a new technology. I suddenly feel extremely conspicuous.

Have I, perhaps, done something really, really terrible?

I can feel my face going pale. Freida reaches out grabs my hands tightly.

“Maine, you know a lot of unexpected, unknown things, right? If so, I have a lot of things I can teach you too. So, next time, I want you to just come and chat, not to work! I’ll have plenty of sweets prepared for you, so let’s have a nice long chat, with just us girls!”
“Ah, that sounds—”

Great, I was about to say, but I feel a sharp tug on my hair. I reflexively turn my head, and see Lutz looking at me with a grim face, shaking his head.

Argh, that was close. I almost carelessly agreed to have a nice, long, girls-only chat.

If I’d let that slip, then I’d run the risk of having both Lutz and Benno completely excluded. I’m at a loss for words, with no idea how to actually answer the question, so Lutz steps up in my place.

“We’re going to be very busy from now on, so unfortunately we don’t have much time to come over and play.”
“Oh my,” she says, smiling peacefully, “but I didn’t ask *you*, did I?”

She may say that, but my ability to go out is fundamentally dependent on Lutz.

“Maine’s family doesn’t let her go out if I’m not going to be there with her. So, if I’m not here too, Maine won’t be able to come.”
“…Ah, that’s right. There’s no helping it, then. Lutz, you are welcome to come as well.”

Is it because she had this devouring disease as well? Freida immediately understood my situation, then nodded in agreement. Lutz, however, isn’t nodding. He stands unwavering in his denial.

“Like I said earlier, we’re busy.”
“Busy with what?”
“We’re starting to get serious about winter preparations. The entire family needs to work together to prepare ourselves for the winter, so there really isn’t any free time for us to come and chat. Also, once snow starts falling, we won’t be able to go outside, right?”

That’s right, unlike Freida, whose family can just buy all the firewood they need, preparing the huge quantity of firewood and making all of the candles we need is

extremely difficult. It seems like even Freida knows how difficult winter preparations are, so she just slumps her shoulders, not pressuring us any more.

"…So we can't see each other until the spring?"
"Aren't you going to be doing your apprenticeship in the springtime? Is that going to be alright?"
"That'll be just fine. It's not like my apprenticeship will have me working every day of the week. I'll have plenty of sweets prepared come springtime, so please do come by to play!"

When spring comes around, Lutz and I will likely be very busy making paper, but since Benno is still keeping that business hidden from the guild leader, I keep my mouth shut.

I give Freida a big nod, then look over at Lutz.

"Now that I think about it, Lutz, you didn't react much to the sweets, did you? You usually leap right onto whatever food's in front of you, so why?"
"Master Benno told me to keep a good eye on you, and also the parucakes and the other things you make are way tastier. I like food I can always eat more than occasional sweets. I'd be in trouble if you got taken away."

It seems that Lutz, who is always hungry, considers maintaining the richness of his current eating habits far more important than eating the occasional sweet. If that's the case, then I should head to his place with some more new recipes, I think.

"Oh my, I haven't heard of parucakes before. I would be very interested in trying food you've made as well, Maine."
"Um? That's, well…"

I couldn't possibly feed confections made from squeezed-out paru fruit, which would usually be considered bird food, to the pampered daughter of a family like this. Her grandfather would get so angry veins would pop out on his head, and the chef who probably manages their nutritional requirements would go berserk.

"You're saying that Lutz is good enough to eat your food, but I'm not?" she says, teasingly, wearing the saddest frown.

I may be increasingly flustered, but there's still no way I can bring parucakes in front of a rich girl.

Lutz chimes in. "The ingredients are… not something we could feed a young lady like yourself."
"Lutz, you're so mean!"

Freida pouts. With lips pursed, she pouts. No matter how cutely she may be pouting, though, what's impossible is impossible. There's nothing at my house that's fit for Freida to eat.

Besides, making sweets requires help. There really aren't many things that I can prepare entirely on my own. At Lutz's house, I've introduced so many new recipes that I always have four boys who will spare no effort to help in order to eat good food. I can't make anything without ingredients or assistance. Not only am afflicted by the devouring, but I don't think that Freida, who was not only also afflicted but is also a pampered rich girl, would have much in the way of physical strength nor stamina.

"…Umm, so, how about next time, when it's spring, we make something together with the ingredients you have here? Your chef could help us too. If that's the case, we don't need to worry about the ingredients, and there will be people to help us, and your family can have a little more peace of mind? How about it?"
"Well, that's marvelous! That's settled, then."

As soon as we decide on making sweets together, a knock comes at the door shortly before the guild leader and Benno enter.

"Hey," says Benno. "You almost finished? We're leaving."
"Yes, sir," I reply. "Umm, Mister Benno. Could you…"

The six small silver coins that Freida gave us in remuneration are quite a lot of money. To be frank, I'm too scared to carry it myself. As I hold it out for him to look after, he glances at the guild leader.

"Sorry, but do you mind if I borrow your parlor for a moment? I'd like to settle up with these two before we head home."
"Ahh, you wouldn't be here if I hadn't dragged you all out. Please, be my guest."

Benno waits until the guild leader and Freida have left the room, then takes the coins from me and lines them up on the table.

“The materials cost and my commission comes out to three small silver coins; the remaining three are yours. If you hadn’t charged half price for the second one, you’d have earned two more.”
“…This is enough. If I’d sold these hairpins for any more, I’d feel bad about making the ones we’ll sell more cheaply.”

Benno snorts, pulling out his coinpurse.

“What do you want to do with the money? Are you going to bring it all home with you?”
“I’d like to deposit one silver at the guild, and bring five large copper coins home with me.”
“Me too,” says Lutz.

As if he already knew what we were going to say, Benno has already pulled out his guild card and a handful of copper coins. With a touch of our cards, our accounts are settled. I wrap my five copper coins in my handkerchief and place them in my tote bag.

“The guild leader said he’d bring you back to the guildhall in his carriage. Go with him.”
“What about you, Mister Benno?”
“I’ll walk. That carriage is pretty small. Come to the store tomorrow afternoon. Your thread should have arrived by then. We have to decide on a price as well.”
“Yes, sir.”

What could Benno have been discussing with the guild leader, I wonder? He seems far less exceptionally wary than he did before.

Chapter 42
Winter Handiwork

"Hey, Maine, why is it that you deposit a silver coin at the guild every time? Why aren't you bringing it all home to your family?"

As we leisurely walk home, having gotten off the carriage at the Merchant's Guild, Lutz spontaneously asks me this question.

"Aren't you doing the same thing?" I reply.
"I'm doing it because you're doing it. I thought there must be some sort of reason for it, so I was copying you. My family thinks that I'm bringing all of my earnings home, though, so I kind of feel a little bad about it…"

For commoners, who are used to scraping through their daily lives without any money to spare, there isn't really any concept of "savings". At most, when autumn comes around, they start stashing away a little money in their dresser drawers for winter preparations. They don't do anything like depositing money at the Merchant's Guild. Of course, since kids learn things by watching their parents, even the children bring all of their earnings home to their families and spend it all on living expenses.

"I'm saving for next time's initial expenses, you know."
"Next time's initial expenses?" he asks, his head tilted curiously to the side.

Drawing on our own experiences, I explain it to him.

"Remember how after we decided we were going to make paper, we didn't have any tools, any money, nor any adults that we could ask for help, so even getting a single nail was really hard and we got in a lot of trouble?"
"Yeah."

It wasn't all that long ago that we had gotten scolded by Benno for begging Otto for help. Lutz, remembering this, smiles wryly.

"We got lucky when Mister Benno bought the formula for my *'simple shampoo'* in exchange for covering all of our initial expenses, but getting all of those tools took a

huge amount of money, right, Lutz? Whenever you're starting something, you need money."
"The pot, the wood, the ash, the thread, the bamboo work… now that I think about it, that was *really* expensive, wasn't it?"

Lutz, who has recently been visiting various stores for the sake of stocking up on things, understands the quality and cost of things that are sold not at ordinary street stalls, but actual stores. His face goes pale as he realizes just how much the initial investments for our paper-making enterprise really cost.

"And that's why I'm saving money. Since we made a working prototype for Mister Benno, he said that we were done with initial expenses, right? I think that we'll need even more tools to keep making paper from now on, and I also want to start making something new, and all of that requires money. Once we make a lot of paper, and we start trying to make books, we'll need new tools for that too."
"So, it's for the next stuff, huh…"

I can't figure out if Lutz's expression means he has or has not actually understood this. I stare at him fixedly. He has far more pressing reasons than I to actually need to be saving money, but is he aware of them? I wonder if he hasn't even noticed.

After thinking about it for a moment, I slowly open my mouth.

"I don't really want to say or even really think about this, but… Lutz, if by the time we're baptized your parents still don't approve of you becoming a merchant, what are you going to do? …Have you… thought about that?"

His face twists painfully as soon as I ask my question. He answers in a low mumble, without any strength behind his voice at all.

"…I think I'd have to be a live-in apprentice at Master Benno's shop."
"Yeah, if you want to become a merchant, you'll have to do that, right? I'm glad you didn't say you'd give up."

When Lutz seems me smiling, he sighs, looking just a little bit relieved. He's talking about leaving his home behind at such an early age, which takes tremendous resolve, and I think he must still have some doubts about it. Lutz, however, is moving entirely along his own path, which means that he really will be needing money.

“But, Lutz, think about it. If you leave home to become a live-in apprentice, then until your first pay comes in you’ll still need money for living expenses, the clothing you’ll need for your apprenticeship, and so on. There’ll be a huge difference between the Lutz that leaves home with money saved up for his freedom and the Lutz that doesn’t have anything.”
“Ah…”

Lutz raises his head to look at me, looking completely taken aback.

“I don’t think it’s bad at all for you to take the money that you yourself earned and save it away for your own future, you know. I know we’re supposed to be giving everything we earn to the family, so you might feel guilty about it, but you’re not even old enough to be really working, anyway, and you brought home thirteen large copper coins over five days, you know? That’s more than Ralph brings home from his apprenticeship, you know? So it’s really okay.”
“Huh… I make more than Ralph.”

Lutz smiles proudly. Ralph, who’s still only recently started his apprenticeship, probably brings home only about eight to ten large copper coins over an entire month. The amount the two of us have earned is huge in comparison.

“Maine, thanks. I’m feeling *way* better about this now.”
“I’m glad!”

Grinning broadly, Lutz suddenly turns away from me for some reason, then squats down.

“What’re you doing, Lutz?”
“Get on my back,” he replies.
“What?”
“We’ve gone to a *lot* of different places today, so you must be getting tired, right? You’re looking a little pale.”

Without thinking about it, I reach up to feel my face. I still don’t feel particularly feverish, so I don’t think I have a fever.

“…I’m looking pale?”

“It’s not that bad right now, but we need to be meeting with Master Benno tomorrow afternoon, so I think you shouldn’t push too hard. My number one job is looking after your health, after all.”
“…Alright. Thanks, then!”

It’s very true that, after a day of walking from place to place, I’m getting rather worn out. Since Lutz is telling me not to push too hard, things must be getting really dangerous.

Lutz takes me home, with me on his back. I, of course, climb the stairs up under my own power, but since there’s a chance I might get too tired halfway up, Lutz comes up with me, leading me by the hand. He’s seriously a big help.

To be perfectly honest, climbing the stairs up to my home is the hardest part.

“I’m home, Mommy.”
“Oh my, Lutz! It’s rare for you to come all the way up here, isn’t it? Is Maine not doing well today?”
“We’d originally planned to just go show the hairpins to Master Benno today, but we wound up meeting the guild leader too, and then he invited us to his house immediately. He said that he wanted us to deliver the hairpins in person. So, I think that she’s probably very tired right now.”
“I see. Thanks as always, Lutz. You’re a big help.”

As she says that, she slips a bribe, a medium copper coin, into his hand. When I see the coin, I remember something.

“Ah, that’s right! Mommy, I want to give you this before I forget.”
“Maine… what in the world have you done now?”

When my mother sees the five large copper coins I hold out for her, all the color drains from her face. Her eyes go as wide as I’ve ever seen them, as if there’s no way she could have possibly thought that the hairpins were worth anywhere close to that much money.

“This is the money from making the hairpins for Freida. I said that she was buying them for a lot of money because they were so rare, right?”
“I heard you say that, but… really, *this* much money…”

I'm sorry, Mother. There's no way that I can tell you that this is after the introduction, handling, and materials fees as well as the small silver coin I set aside for my own personal use. Not with this atmosphere, anyway.

"Is this true, Lutz?" she asks him.
"She's not lying, Auntie Eva. Since I worked on it too, I got the same amount too. Maine and I split it halfway."

As he says it, he shows my mother his own share of the money. With that, my mother is finally convinced, and places a hand on her chest to calm herself down.

Hey, wait, Mother. I'm your *daughter*, why don't you believe *me*?

"Master Benno called us out to his shop tomorrow as well, so we're going to have to go there again. So, I want to make sure Maine gets as much rest as she can."
"Thanks again, Lutz."

After we see Lutz off, my mother closes the door behind him with a clack. With her eyebrows raised, she throws me straight into bed.

"Don't overdo it, Maine. Even so, you sold that for a *lot* of money, didn't you?"
"Yeah. Freida's really rich, and the thread was really high quality, and we made two instead of just one, you know? Plus, since everyone's so busy this season with winter preparations, she paid a high fee for that, too. So, if we make it for other people, it's not going to be that expensive."
"I see! She was being considerate, since it's such a busy season for us."

It seems like my mother's image of the guild leader and Freida is one of kind, gentlemanly rich people who consider the plight of the poor. Since I don't think she's ever going to actually meet these two, I don't think I need to dispel her illusions. My mother, relieved now that she knows why her child brought home so much money, heads out of the bedroom so that she can work on preparing dinner for the family.

I, left behind in the bedroom, really do feel like a heavy weight presses down on me. As soon as I lay down on the bed, I start drifting off and soon, without even eating dinner, fall into a deep sleep.

When I awaken, it's already morning. Since I'm going to be going to Benno's shop in the afternoon, I decide that I should spend the morning resting. It's only about half my choice. Thanks to the fact that I've been going out quite a bit lately, my body is still rather heavy despite the fact that I got quite a bit of sleep. My family, seeing flickers of signs that my fever may be returning, have forcefully thrown me back to bed as they do their winter preparations.

"Maine, be good and rest up," commanded my father as he inspected our wooden front door. "You've been working too hard lately! You're making more money than Daddy, you know?"

Tory and my mother, as they spread out the thick blankets and carpets we'll be using during the winter so they can air out, tell me,

"You're going to Mister Benno's shop today as well, aren't you? If you don't sit quietly this morning, you're going to collapse again, you know?"
"Maine, you're not really useful for winter preparations, so focus on what you're actually good for."

And, with that, they prohibit me from leaving my bed. Since there's nothing else I can do, I squirm my way back under the blankets, watching as my family ceaselessly moves about, working on their preparations.

This year, unlike last year, I actually understand what goes into preparing for the winter, so I really thought I could be a little more useful, though…

I think my family's excessive care might be because I came home yesterday, delivered five large copper coins to my mother, then promptly fell fast asleep. I, who can't even satisfactorily do a single thing around the house to help out, earned thirteen large copper coins over the course of not even five days, and then slept so soundly that I missed dinner. They suspect, in their minds, that I must have been doing some absurdly hard labor.

However, over the past few days, I've been going around to a lot of different places, which for me really *is* a kind of hard labor.

When the fourth bell rings at noon, I grab my tote bag as usual and head out the front door, dressed to keep out the cold.

“I’m off,” I say.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs and meet Lutz, he greets me with a little frown.

“Maine, you don’t look too good, you know? Isn’t it okay if I go by myself?”
“It’s because we’ve been so busy lately. Mister Benno said that we were going to talk about pricing for our winter handiwork today, though, so I’m going today. I’ll leave carrying the thread to you, Lutz, but I want to go so that I can handle deciding on a price.”
“…Right, pricing, yeah. I still don’t really understand that.”

I can’t, of course, leave deciding prices to Lutz yet, since he still doesn’t understand numbers very well. Today, I just want to go to the shop and discuss things relating to the pricing of the hairpins with Benno.

“Well, at least let me carry you there.”
“What? No, I can’t ask that. You already carried me home yesterday…”
“I’m going to be carrying all the thread back with me today, so I can’t carry you then. So, save your energy for now.”

I know full well that it’s impossible to get Lutz to back down when he gets this stubborn in times like this, so I get up on his back. Even though I’ve grown a little bit taller, I feel like Lutz has gotten even bigger. Although I know it’s because of my illness, it’s still a little frustrating that there’s this much of a difference in size despite us being the same age.

“Lutz? It seems that you’re carrying Maine, is she all right?”

When Mark sees Lutz approach with me on his back, he rushes towards us, with startled eyes wide open. He reacts far too sensitively to my physical condition. It seems like me collapsing to the ground right in front of him caused quite a bit of trauma. I’m really, really sorry about that.

“…Lately, we’ve been going out every single day to go to various places, so she’s started to get a little tired. I think she’ll probably be stuck in bed after tonight. So, I’d like to finish up our business as fast as we can.”

“I understand,” he says with a nod, then leads us to the room in the back. “Master Benno, Maine and Lutz have arrived.”
“Bring 'em in.”

The door opens with a creak, and Mark shows us in, following shortly behind us.

“Lutz has informed me that Maine’s condition is not very good today. Please consider conducting your business with haste today.”
“Got it. Sit down, you two.”
“Yes, sir.”

As soon as we arrive at the table, we immediately begin discussing our winter handiwork. Benno informs us of the price of the thread, I estimate how many we could make with these quantities of material, and we decide on a price.

“Mister Benno, I’d like to avoid making these hairpins too expensive. Since the thread we’re using is cheap as well, could we maybe price it as cheaply as we need to so that many people would be able to purchase them?”
“I understand how you feel, Maine, but there’s no way I can sell these at a bargain right from the start. The price is only going to decrease once a lot of these start entering the market. We should be selling these for about three large copper coins at first.”

Since these are for special occasions, that’s a price that my family could hypothetically afford, although it would be a bit of a reckless expenditure. It’s a little harsh, I think, but if sisters could share them with each other, somehow… if I consider that prices will slowly go down from this initial price, I think I can say that this is alright.

“If that’s the case, that’s fine, then. I understand.”

After I nod in agreement, the conversation next moves onto Lutz and my share of the profit.

“For each hairpin, your cut is about five medium coins after the materials cost and my commission. I’ve set it higher than usual, since this is a new handicraft and there’s nobody else I can order these from.”
“Five medium copper coins is *high*?! Doesn’t that mean that we really ripped the guild leader off for Freida’s hairpins?!”

At the price Benno had negotiated, our share after making two hairpins should have been five small silver coins. That's a hundredfold increase in price.

"That was based on that old bastard's opening bid, so don't worry about that."
"…So, ordinarily, how much would we be getting?"

Last year, I helped Tory out with her basket-weaving handiwork, but the two of us were never actually given any of that money, so I was never really curious about how much each one was actually worth.

"For things like winter handiwork, us merchants take our commission, then the master of the sewing or craftsman's workshops takes his cut as well, so the amount that the people who actually make the thing would get is about one medium copper coin per item, I think? Since this order is going direct to you, without going through a workshop, your cut is high."
"What?! One medium copper coin… it's that little?!"

After my initial shock wears off, I remember that the things people back in Japan made at home for a little side income were also pretty cheap. Something like a beaded strap would be something like 50 yen each. If I think about it like that, one medium copper coin each isn't that surprising. Getting five coins is actually extraordinary.

"At workshops, the only people who can actually buy and sell things are basically just the masters. The amount any given workshop master takes can vary somewhat, though? Maine, don't you have any experience with that?"

Since I said we could make hairpins for winter handiwork, he's asking, don't we already know how this works? I think about what happened last year.

"Last year, I helped my older sister Tory with her work. I was working without any actual knowledge of how much they cost or what the commissions were, and I didn't see any of the money from that. Huh? Now that I think about it, since we were selling something, we needed a guild membership, wouldn't we? I wonder if my mother's registered?"

The one who delivered Tory's and my handiwork was my mother, but I've never once heard her mention anything about going to the Merchant's Guild. When I said I'd gone, she'd asked about it as if it were something very rare.

“Ah, so your mother runs a street stall, does she?”
“No, she usually works as a dyer, I think.”
“If that’s the case, then that was probably work given to her for the winter. Since each worker just delivers the products of work she was assigned to do by her job, there’s no need for each of them to be registered with the Merchant’s Guild. It’s fine if the master’s the only one registered, as a representative of the studio.”

It seems that the managers at the places where craftsmen work handle the actual buying and selling of things, so individual employees don’t need to be registered as merchants. Instead, it seems like craftsmen register with the various crafting guilds.

Whoa, this is the first I’m hearing about that. Then, if I were to get help on making the hairpins, it would have to be after they meet their quotas.

“In other words, last year’s handiwork was assigned to my mother at work, and Tory helped her out with that, and then I helped Tory out in turn.”
“What did you make?”
“I made things like this. This is the first one I made, so it’s very simple, but I made the others I helped with in my spare time a lot more elaborate.”

Triumphantly, I hold up my totebag to show it off. Benno, in response, smiles bitterly, rubbing his temples.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.
“…So it was *you*, again?”
“Huh?”

Why is he saying “again”? Now that I think about it, I think I’ve seen that particular bitter smile before. Have I, once again, done something bad?

“I recall that amongst all of the baskets being sold near the end of spring, there certainly were some number of finely decorated bags like that. For winter handiwork, if you can’t handle the quantity, your income won’t increase. Since it’s quick and dirty work, there’s a lot of roughly woven baskets out there, so those really stood out far too much, I’m afraid.”
“Noooooooooo!”

I, in my free time, tried making somewhat elaborate handbags, and then taught Tory how to do it… I never thought that those would stand out so much on the market.

“I wanted to know who made them, and I was able to track down the workshop they came from, but since all of the winter handiwork was turned in basically all at once, I wasn’t able to determine the specific craftsman who’d made them.”
“Ah, that’s good~… you didn’t find out…”

I’m well aware that I’m a little different, so I’ve been trying to keep myself hidden from the world as much as I can, but I have a feeling that doing so might not actually be possible.

“Since a bag you made for yourself would be, of course, as durable as you could make it, I didn’t think that the one you carry was particularly unnatural, and there aren’t any decorations on it, so I hadn’t made the connection until now, but… it seems like every single mysterious thing I’ve seen in the last half year or so have all come from you, Maine.”

Elaborate bags, hairpins, simple shampoo, paper… now that I’m actually counting them out, I’m growing increasingly perplexed. Now that I’ve heard Benno’s perspective, I can’t actually say that my actions were at all those of someone who wanted to stay hidden. Feeling so amazingly ashamed that I have no idea what else to do, I apologize in a tiny voice.

“…I’m sorry, I guess.”
“Well, whatever. More importantly, it looks like you have a tendency to make things elaborate in your free time. For the hairpins, just make the same design as the first one you did. Don’t change it arbitrarily. This is *final*. Got that?”
“I understand. The colors on them will be different, but they’ll all have a unified design.”

I never would have thought that the bags I made last year would have stood out so much, and I definitely do not want any new hairpins to stand out so terribly as the ones I made for Freida. I can sidestep this problem entirely by making sure that the design of each hairpin matches the rest.

“I think that concludes all of the business we need to talk about for now. Ah, that’s right; you said you wanted to study during the winter, didn’t you? I’ll lend this to you for now, look over it when you get home.”
“…What’s this?”

When I look down at the wooden notes he hands me, he firmly pinches my cheek.

“When you get home! Got it?!”
“Yeth!!”
“Good grief…. You can bring it back when your fever’s gone back down. Head home right away and get some sleep. Lutz, keep an eye on this idiot. She looks like the type to get in some kind of accident walking home because she’s too busy reading.”

Suddenly remembering the time during my Urano years where I was heading home from school with my nose in a book and got hit by a car, I shut my mouth tightly and look away in embarrassment.

As we leave, Mark gives us the basket he’s prepared for us, full of the thread that we had ordered, which Lutz takes. We depart for home, with Mark seeing us off with an extremely concerned look on his face. We take it at a slow, leisurely pace. On the way, I ask Lutz about something that I want to discuss with him before I’m stuck in bed for a while.

“Hey, Lutz, about splitting things up on the hairpins…”
“What’s up?”
“Since the flower part takes way more time to make than the pin part, do you think we can split it three coins to two?”
“Sounds good. If we’re thinking about the time it takes, I’d be fine with four to one, I think.”

If we’re just thinking about time, then Lutz has the better suggestion, but I’ve got a somewhat different reason behind asking for three to two.

“In that case, since your math is so terrible, let’s stick with three to two.”
“My math?”
“Right! This time, we’ll each take one coin for our commission, and we can pay two medium copper coins for each flower part, and one coin for each pin part. Why don’t we get our families to do those?”
“Huh? Our families?”

Lutz tilts his head doubtfully, as if he has no idea what I could possibly be saying. I press on.

“Yeah! If I think about my own speed for the flower parts, I don’t think I could make any more than about thirty of them a month. Since we’d be in a fix if we had a lot of pin parts left over, how about to start with you get your family to make thirty pins in a month? Then we can charge a commission for them.”
“And that’s so we can become merchants?”

Lutz, remembering our earlier discussion about the differences between merchants and craftsmen, seems to be understanding the point I’m trying to get at.

“Right, don’t you want to start acting like Mister Benno? You need to study really hard in order to be a good merchant’s apprentice, you know? I think it’s impossible to make only the hairpin part. Well, if you make any yourself, then I think you can do whatever you want with the money you make from the stuff you make, though.”

This is effectively holding money back from our families, which I also don’t feel very comfortable with, but we’re going to be merchants. If we give our families preferential treatment like that, we won’t be able to make a living in commerce anytime soon.

After I explain it to him, Lutz stares down at the ground for a while, but soon he firmly raises his head.

“…I’ll give it a try.”

Since I’m the one who’ll be making the flower parts, the thread for doing so should go in my house, so Lutz carries it all the way up to our door. This is only natural, but my entire family is so shocked by the fact that we’ve come home with such a huge quantity of thread that they stop working on their winter preparations.

“Lutz, what’s all this thread for?”

Hey, you know, why are you asking Lutz that and not *your own daughter*?

Grumbling about our difference in reliability, I offer an explanation anyway.

“This is the thread for making hairpins. Since Benno’s going to buy the finished product from us, he bought the thread for us in advance. This is the raw materials for my winter handiwork, so don’t just use it on your own!”
“I understand,” says my mother. “Thanks again, Lutz. Here, eat this, it’s tasty!”

She hands Lutz a small bottle, filled with the jam she’s just finished. Lutz gladly accepts it, smiling brilliantly, and then leaves for home with a bounce in his step.

“I’ll get this into the storeroom,” says my father, “so Maine, get to bed.”

He picks up the basket full of thread to bring to the storeroom, shooing me briskly towards the bedroom.

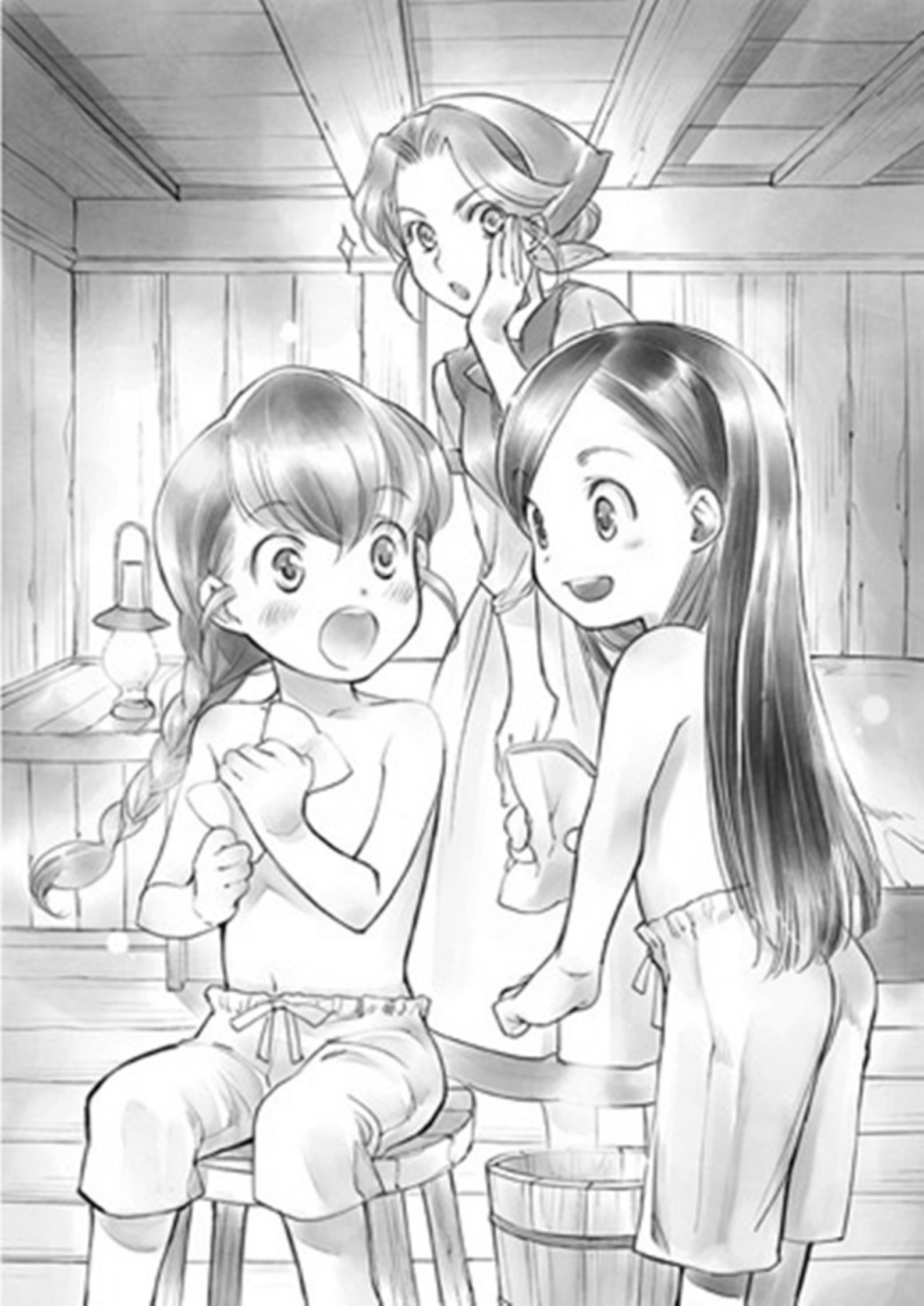
“Urgh, at least let me wash off first! I didn’t get to yesterday, and I went out today too so now I feel really gross.”
“Perfect timing,” says Tory, “the water’s just starting to get hot. I wanted to get clean too, so I’ll bring it in for you.”
“Thanks, Tory.”

For the last year, I’ve been regularly wiping ourselves down to get clean, along with Tory. Lately, she’s started feeling bothered whenever she goes more than three days without washing off. She sets things up for bathing in the bedroom in the spot that’s closest to the stove and thus the warmest. As she washes herself off, she starts speaking with an earnest tone.

“Maine, last year you didn’t know how to do anything at all, so I was super surprised when you found yourself a job all by yourself, you know.”
“Are you making baskets this year, too?” I ask, soaking a towel into the bucket and then wringing it out.

Tory moves her pleated hair out of the way, wiping down the area around her scalp, while explaining her plans to me.

“Yeah. Mom’s work is worth way more than I can make from the handiwork at my job. I’m going to be cutting up the wood we’ll need for making baskets from now on, and peeling all the bark off.”
“Oh, really? You don’t absolutely have to do the handiwork from your own job?”



Was she not assigned anything to do by the master of her workshop? I tilt my head curiously to the side, since I'd heard from Benno that they worked on a quota. Tory chuckles quietly.

"It's just pocket money. There's other people that make a lot, and some people are also busy making clothes for their families, so it's not mandatory, you know?"
"Aaah, so everyone's got their own deal."

I thought that I could get Tory to help me out after she'd filled her own quota, but if she doesn't really have to actually meet a quota, then I wonder if there isn't any problem with having her help me right from the start?

I briefly look over at her, smiling broadly.

"What I'm making this year is hairpins, like the one I made for you. I can make two medium copper coins for each one I make like that."
"Huh?! Really?! That's a lot of money, isn't it? Can I help too?"
"Yeah, let's work together!"

When I say that, Tory gets really happy and excited. Her eyes brighten at the thought that if she makes a lot of them, she can get some pocket money.

"Hey, hey, Maine. Can I do anything to help prepare?"
"Mister Benno already got us all the thread, and Lutz is making the pins, so we don't need to do any more preparing. As long as we've got thin needles, we should be fine."
"This'll be super nice if we don't have to do any groundwork first," she says, laughing gleefully to herself.

Her smile suddenly freezes. She blinks her eyes once, then points at something behind me. When I turn my head around to see what's the matter, I see my mother standing behind me, scowling, tapping one hand against her cheek, thinking about something with a profoundly serious look on her face.

"Hey, Maine. Once I'm done with your new dress, I can help too, right?"

Lutz, what do we do now?

My mother's getting fired up.

We might need more pins.

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